TEN OUTSTANDING STORIES

ARGOSY

JULY, 1958

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THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

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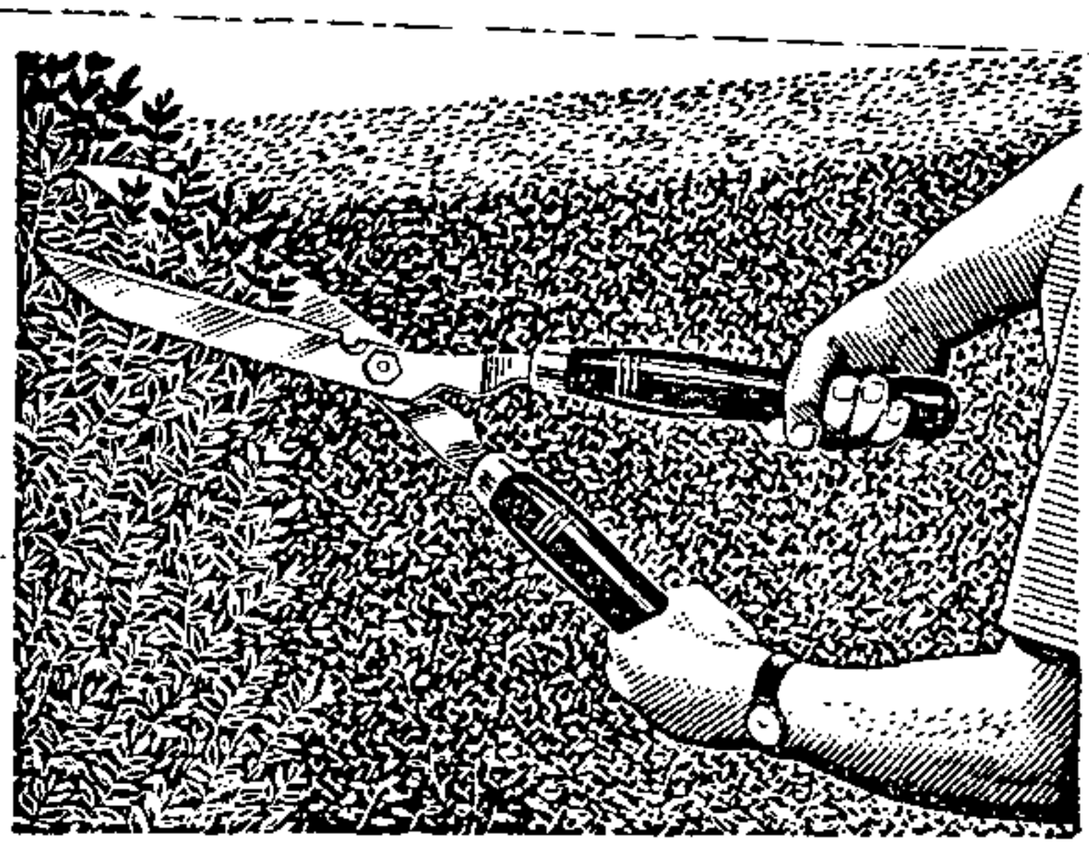

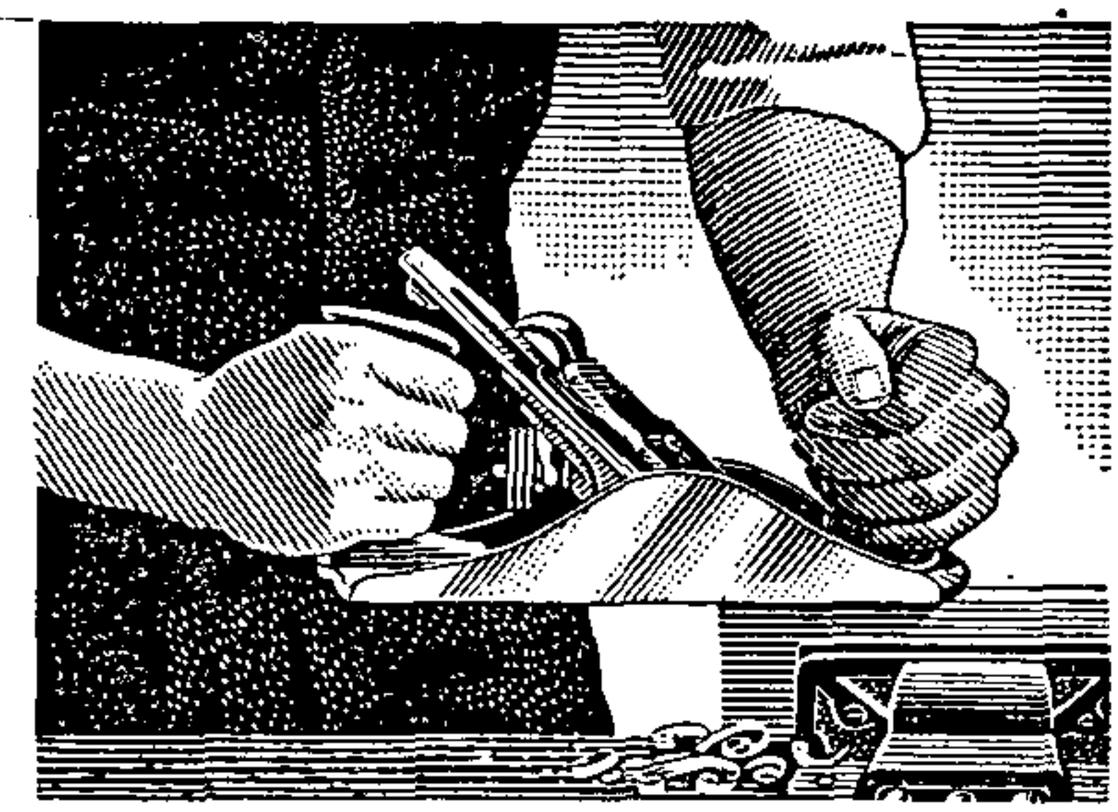

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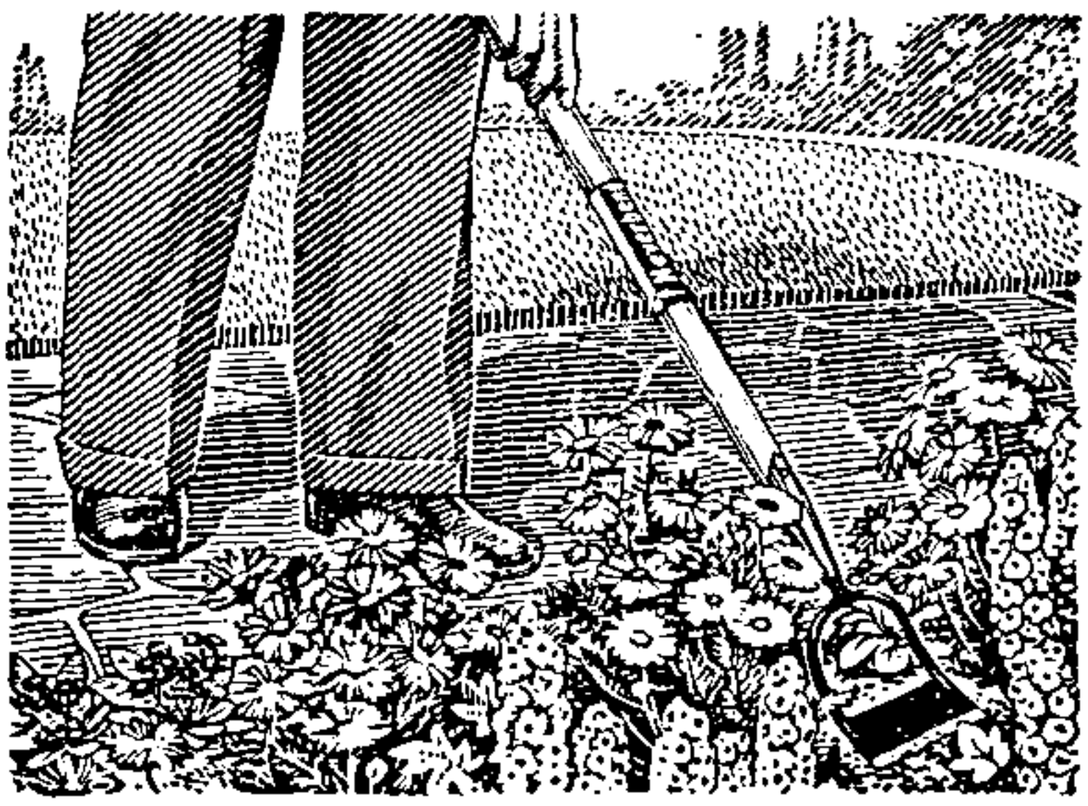

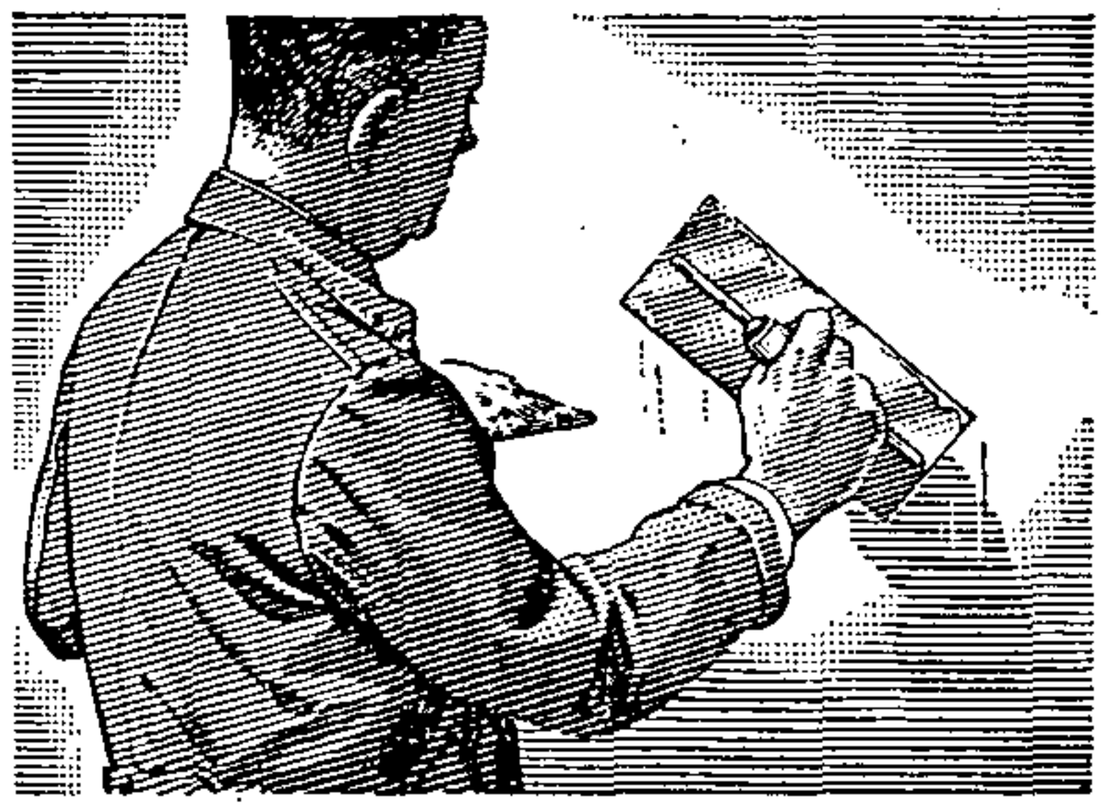

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ARGOSY

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Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER, and published on the 10th of each month by THE AMALGAMATED PRESS, LTD., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London E.C.4. Registered for Transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland, £1 13s. for 12 months, 16s. 6d. for 6 months. Overseas (except Canada), £1 11s. for 12 months, 15s. 6d. for 6 months. Canada, £1 8s. 6d. for 12 months, 14s. 3d. for 6 months. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. GORDON & GOTCH, LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. KINGSTONS, LTD.

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Log Book

IF you are going on a driving holiday, a technical journal recently observed, now is the time to listen to the noise made by your car, to learn which sounds may signal impending disaster.

To our mind such advice, especially given just before a holiday, is just about as cheering as the suggestion that we should read up the symptoms of ptomaine poisoning in a medical dictionary, but no matter, here goes: the sounds may be divided into two classes, bangs, bumps, and rattles from the body, and squeaks, tappings, and thumps from the engine. Class A may be disregarded, we learnt, provided there is adequate reason to believe that the car will not suddenly fall apart. Very well—only it is a pity from our point of view that the noises in Class A generally seem to drown those in Class B.

Groans or squeaks like " a siren a very long way off " are probably being emitted by springs or shock absorbers. A gentle clattering, like " walnuts being shaken in a colander " may be the valve tappets; squealing like " a knife drawn over glass " might be the fan belt; hissing is probably a gasket; a spitting sound like " water on an electric iron " could be a faulty connection; a sound like " a bicycle chain being jounced on a tray " announces the final disintegration of the engine. Any other sounds the driver hears are probably internal ones produced by his own nervous system as he wonders whether the siren he has heard is shock absorbers or the French police overtaking him.

With a rigid, fixed expression he coasts past the collines de Normandie, ignoring the scenery and the arguments of his womenfolk in the back about the best place to stop and picnic.

" That field looked nice."

" Looked full of ants to me."

"Bill! Don't go so fast! How about that little wood?"

"Nowhere to park. Looks private."

"Do shut up," says the harassed driver, trying to decide whether it is walnuts or the bicycle chain. Having fixed on walnuts he stops at a garage and tries to make himself understood to the propriétaire. "Un bruit qui se rassemble aux—" what is the French for walnuts?

"Noisettes," his wife prompts helpfully from the rear.

"—Noisettes dans une passoire." Strangely enough the dictionary gives the word for colander but this linguistic triumph cuts little ice with the garage-owner. When, having searched the dictionary in vain for valve tappets, the driver adds, "Nous sommes des aliénés," he shrugs his shoulders and makes off, tapping his forehead.

The doomed family continue on their way accompanied by sirens, walnuts, knives, hissing, and the fatal bicycle chain.

There's an awful lot to be said for travelling by train; untroubled by squeaks or taps the head of the family can ignore his loved ones, immersed in the latest Argosy, while the landscape of France slips peacefully by.

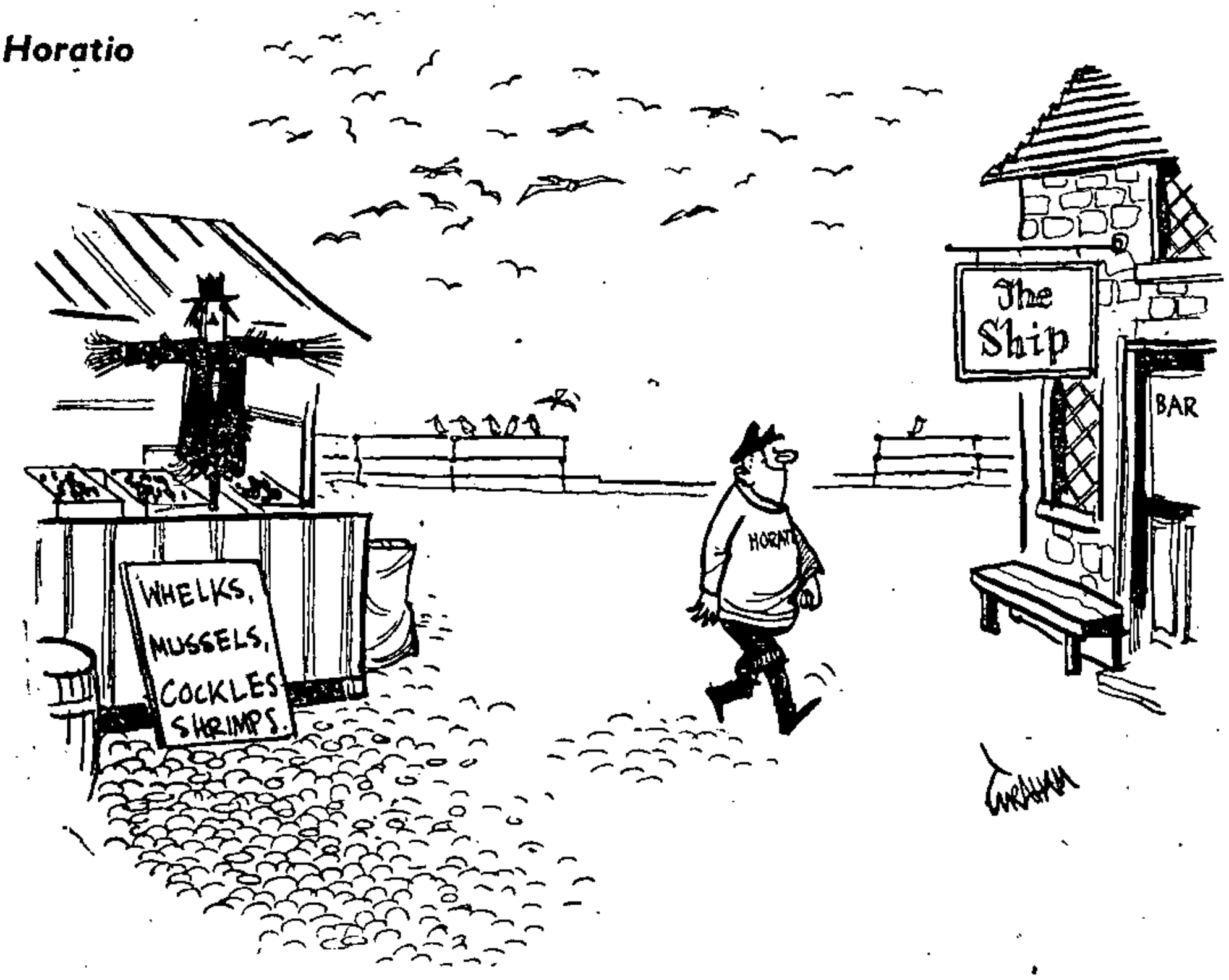
Edith Pargeter, who won the B.E.M. as a Wren in the war for "zeal and whole-hearted devotion to duty," has since then divided her time between writing and travelling. She says she has struck up a particular friendship with Czechoslovakia, whose people, scenery, and music she loves. During a journey across Europe to Prague the idea for *Grim Fairy Tale* came to her, but we can't tell you how—it would give away the plot! The list of her own well-known books includes *Reluctant Odyssey*, *A Means of Grace*, as well as several translations from the Czech.

Richard Clapperton, one of Argosy's youngest contributors, is twenty-three. Born in Edinburgh, he emigrated to Australia with his family in 1950, and had a series of jobs there, from garage hand to newspaper copy-holder; he has worked on the *Brisbane Courier Mail* for three years, and on the *Sydney Morning Herald* for two, writing stories and drawing cartoons meanwhile by way of relaxation. He left Australia for Paris in 1955, having had seventy stories and over forty cartoons printed. At present he is living and writing in Barcelona. Spain, he says, supplies all his wants, except that there aren't enough golf-courses.

Detective Sergeant Petrella comes of age this month with his twenty-first Argosy story. Modest though he is, there seems little doubt that this stalwart climber on the police ladder will end as Assistant Commissioner.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



MARABOU ROCK

The important thing now
was to remain alive

BY RICHARD CLAPPERTON

LIEUTENANT Steve Montrose wiped the inside of his hat with a handkerchief and grinned at the girl who had just opened the door. It was November; behind him the bitumen road was scarred by the heat.

When he said he was inquiring about a room to let the girl smiled and opened the door wider.

"*Come in out of the heat and I'll get you a drink,*" she said.

He followed her into the dining-room: there was a cane lounge pushed back against the window, a box radio by the wall near the kitchen and, in the centre of the room, an old oak table littered with newspapers, sewing, kiddies' books. It was certainly not a well-to-do home.

But, he thought, a soldier couldn't be fussy. Good bed, that's all a man needed. And decent food; not that the food dished up by the Brisbane Anti-Aircraft Battery was so inedible, but it was desirable, apart from creature comforts, to have quick access to town. The town of Marabou was four miles from camp, and since Steve was stationed on Marabou Rock, three miles east of camp, that made it seven miles for him; and even in that country where almost everyone has a car anyway, twenty-eight miles' travel at weekends is a criminal waste of time. So it was better to be right in town.

And this place, he thought, grinning at a naked, limbless doll on the floor, looked all right. It was much better than he anticipated. Much better, for instance, than Marabou Rock, where he and two Signals privates mounted guard daily over forty-five thousand obsolete rounds of Bofors ammunition which were to be dumped later in the sea . . .

When the girl returned with the drinks he said, "I was just noticing the kiddies' books there."

"Yes, they're terrors," she smiled, sitting down. "Two girls."

She had a shy smile. He gestured to a photograph on the radio. "And that's your husband, I take it?"

"Yes." She looked at the photograph and nodded faintly. "He died in Malaya. Four years ago."

"Oh."

"But I get along."

Her skin was lovely; she hasn't let herself go, he thought, in spite of having two children on her hands. Her hair, burnished chestnut, lay in soft waves by her ears; her eyebrows were light, unpencilled; it was hard to define her expression.

Sensing sympathy in his silence, she smiled and said, "But I'm not so badly off, really. The house is my own, terrible as it is, and with Sylvia and Jane I'm never really alone. Only, with Jane starting school, she'll need new clothes, you see." She smiled again. "Hence the new lodger. Though, I must say, I was hoping for someone more permanent. I mean, the Battery's only down here for a month, isn't it?"

Steve nodded. "Immediately a permanent tenant shows up, you must kick me out. O.K.?"

"O.K.," she laughed.

All that partitioned the verandah bedroom from the dining-room was a pair of french windows that wouldn't shut, and when he moved in the next night, the girl apologized. "Maybe I could put up a curtain, or something," she said.

Steve shook his head. "Hope I don't frighten the kids. Where are they?"

"In the garden."

At that moment Jane and Sylvia came in and stood on the verandah, blinking shyly at the Lieutenant's uniform. They avoided his eyes, smiling. They were four and six years old respectively, and looked now at their mother for explanation.

The girl said, "Say hullo to Mr. ——"

"Montrose—Stephen James Móntrose. But you take your pick, girls—Monty, Steve, Knucklehead, Puddin' head . . ."

Amid the children's squeals of laughter, she said, "We'll make it Steve, if we may."

"Steve it is, then. And what," he asked the girls, "is Mummy's name?"

"Fiona," they said.

After that it was Fiona and Steve. They were drawn to each other quickly and instinctively, like two people with the same troubles, though it seemed they had no troubles. It could have been the case of the lonely soldier and the wise woman; and then, too, Fiona was a mother, and while women always have the mother instinct, children give it more power and direct it more freely, naturally, at the strangest comers.

But it wasn't that. Steve was thirty-five and, though he was lonely, he knew just how to get some small enjoyment from loneliness. He was old enough and travelled enough to distinguish pity from affection. In those blue eyes that watched him over the breakfast table for the next fortnight, he recognized a shy interest, a vague light that seemed to reflect his own longing.

And the surest thing of all was their mutual sense of good choice. Fiona, with that mature beauty, that humble smile, must have had strong offers in the four years since her husband died. This was no home from home, Steve thought; this was home.

If he doubted it, that doubt seemed killed one morning when he was wakened by voices at the front door. He pulled the covers from his face and squinted at the sunlit verandah where Fiona, in an apron, held the door open.

A man's voice said, " It was about a room . . ."

" I'm sorry," Fiona said. " It's already taken."

" Well," the man said, " there are a lot of soldiers in town; is it a soldier you've got? If so, it would only be temporary, wouldn't it? And I was wondering . . ."

" I'm sorry," Fiona said. " It's not a soldier, he's permanent."

The door closed; and Steve thought, I really ought to get up and ask her what she means. But he went back to sleep, curiously pleased all the same.

At about two o'clock in the morning a few days later, he was roused to consciousness by a new and persistent sound. It hovered on the edge of his dreams and finally drew him out into wakefulness.

It was rain. A drumming roar of rain beat harshly down on the corrugated roof. He listened to it a while; and presently he heard someone crying. It's Sylvia, he thought. Sylvia was six years old, afraid of thunder.

He listened for some minutes then, when the crying didn't stop, he got up, went through the dining-room, and knocked on the bedroom door. The crying ceased; he hesitated, then knocked again, and the child's voice came thinly through the sound of rain, " Mummy? "

He opened the door and Sylvia stared at him from the bed; her eyes were red and wet.

Steve said, " Where's Mummy? "

" In the garden," the child said, " in the water."

" All right, you go back to sleep like a good girl," he said, and closed the door behind him.

In the water, he thought, what the devil could that mean?

He slid the kitchen window aside and looked out into the

garden. Water moved in the moonlight; the whole garden was flooded. Then he saw Fiona in the middle of the garden, a mackintosh over her head.

"For Pete's sake!" he shouted, and ran furiously down the steps. He splashed towards her, muttering to himself.

Fiona flashed a torch at him. "You'll get your feet wet," she called, "you'll catch cold."

"What the devil are you doing?" he exploded. "What sort of a midnight caper is this?"

"I have to let the water out, or it'll go under the house."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"It's all right."

"It damn well isn't all right! Don't you realize you've got two kids up there? Don't you know you could get pneumonia or something? What are you trying to do? Commit suicide?"

"I'm trying," she said quietly, "to let the water out."

"Where?"

"There's a manhole-cover thing . . ."

Fiona was groping under the water with her hands, but he took her arm away.

"Go back to the house," he said sharply. "I'll let the water out. Get into some dry clothes, and make a cup of tea, heaven knows, we'll need it."

After she had gone up to the house, he searched fumblingly under the water, and managed to drag out the garden drain-cover. He moved it aside and waded back to the wooden steps. Then he looked up and saw the kitchen light was on, and slowly mounted the stairs. In the moonlight, he watched the water swirl across the garden into the drain. Then he reached the door and went in.

Fiona was setting two cups on the table; she had changed into a green dressing-gown and slippers. Passing him as she went into the kitchen she asked over her shoulder, "Did you shift it?"

He waited till she came out of the kitchen again, and said, "That's too heavy a job for a woman, Fiona."

She shrugged, and began to pour out the coffee.

"I do it all the time. The water has to get away; someone has to shift the wretched thing."

"Well, don't do it again."

"My," she laughed warmly, "you're a worrier, aren't you?"

"You're not listening to me!" He clutched her arm and pulled her to him. A taste of anger rose in his mouth. He was almost going to shout again—of all the little fools! he thought—and then, suddenly, as though her nearness had dissolved the anger in his throat and calmed his mind, he hesitated, touched her cheek gently, and kissed her.

She drew away from him and put her hands on his arms, looking at him seriously.

" I suppose," he said thickly, " I should apologize."

Fiona's face was expressionless, but there was hurt in her voice. " Why? " she said. " Was there something bad about it? "

" No. It's just that—"

" Or is it the children? " Her voice wavered and he thought she was going to cry. " Because I have two children, does that make it distasteful for you? "

" Fiona," he said.

" Well, what's the matter? "

He took a deep breath. " I'm just scared, that's what's the matter. Look," he said, gesturing to the table, " let's—let's sit down."

They sat down. Fiona continued to look at him steadily.

Finally, he said, " Ever since I came here I knew something like this was going to happen. Ever since I saw you, ever since you told that man at the door there was no room, I knew I wanted you more than anything I'd ever wanted before. The reason I kissed you just now was because I couldn't help it. Because I knew that at some time—I didn't know when—I was going to tell you how I felt. And if you'd said no, I—I just don't know . . . But I'm scared."

" Of what, Steve? " she asked, quietly.

" Look, Fiona . . ." He made a tired gesture. " I'm thirty-five years old. A Signals lieutenant. That's not progress."

" The fact is," he said, " they don't even need me here in Marabou—that's why they stuck me on Marabou Rock to guard that ammunition. Forty-five thousand rounds of obsolete ammo and me—a Signals man—guarding it. It's like being a garbage collector. It's not the way to start a marriage."

Fiona smiled. " You're too proud. Besides, that's not the hard part, Steve. For me, you're all I'd ever want you to be. The hard part is all on your side . . ." She nodded to the bedroom where Sylvia and Jane slept. " You'd immediately have two problems to start with."

Steve grinned. " They're wonderful kids, Fiona. You're a wonderful mother. For me, you've got all I want, all I've been looking for."

They were silent awhile, and Fiona watched him carefully. " You really think it would work, Steve? Because—I'm thinking of the children—if something went wrong . . ."

" Nothing will go wrong, nothing." Fiona still looked worriedly at him, and he said, " Listen, darling, for fifteen years I've rolled round practically the whole of Australia, and until now

I've never met the woman I couldn't dismiss as not being right. And I'm telling you nothing will go wrong. I love those kids almost as much as you do.

"I know what you're thinking. Here's a rollicking soldier boy; how can he be serious? But at my age you have to be serious. In my gay twenties life was just a big ball of fun, a big joke. But the joke goes stale pretty soon. And I'm sick and tired of freedom, as they call it; I want a wife, and a home, and all the things that go with them. I could have had those things many times over, but I didn't take them because . . . because the woman wasn't you."

"Do you mean that, Steve?"

"Darling, I mean it more than I ever meant anything in my life. I—here now." He stood up, frowning. "What's the matter? You're crying . . ."

"It's nothing." She shook her head, then looked up at him and took his hand, smiling. "I—I just didn't think it was possible," she whispered, "to be so happy again."

Marabou Rock rose starkly out of the sea: a hunchbacked piece of black land connected to the mainland by a narrow strip of grass, and lantana, and trees. You could sunbathe there, that was all. There was no other entertainment. You couldn't even watch the shooting practice because of the curve in the bay.

To be stationed on Marabou Rock, Steve decided, was the worst punishment the Australian army could inflict on a man.

On Monday morning the change from Fiona's house to the black desolation of the Rock was depressing, but on his way to the ammunition dump he amused himself with pictures of a now-bright future. Jane and Sylvia had been delighted; they hardly remembered their own father at all.

It all made him wonder, could happiness really be so simple? Oughtn't there to be some terrible hardship to endure? Oughtn't one to have to fight for the beautiful things in life, instead of their just happening, out of sight, one felt, of the cruel fates? It was something to marvel at as he whiled away the days on the Rock.

The ammunition was stacked, twenty-four shells in a box, on the edge of the cliff; at the end of the shoot they would be loaded on trucks and driven to the beach for reloading in boats, and then taken out to sea.

Young Ackerman was sitting on top of the tarpaulin when Steve drove up in a jeep; and when the driver took the jeep back to camp, he went into the guard tent. Gunner Blythe was sitting by the field radio.

Steve lit a cigarette and sat by the tent-flap, gazing over the long peninsula back to the mainland. The sky was clear blue and the town seemed cubic and artificial in the sunlight. He thought, we'll move to Brisbane after we're married, or Sydney. Perhaps Melbourne, because Melbourne is cooler. He felt perspiration start down his arms, trickle down his neck and chest.

At the foot of the Rock, withered trees and brittle lantana shimmered in the heat. Some country, he thought wryly. If it wasn't floods, it was droughts. If it wasn't droughts, it was fires. Maybe, after all, they'd go to Canada instead. He wished it was Saturday again, with sunlight on the verandah, breakfast in the kitchen. They were going on a river cruise on Saturday afternoon, the four of them . . .

At eleven o'clock he said to Blythe, "Get on to the Orderly Sergeant or somebody and tell him to send the food-truck out."

Blythe looked up after a while and said, "There's nobody to send out, sir. Whole Battery's on the beach for the shoot."

"What about the cookhouse?"

"They're with the Battery."

"All right. You and Ackerman go and see what you can do. If there's nothing at the cookhouse, try the canteen—lemonade and biscuits, anything."

He sat on the boards and watched them walk along the narrow spine of peninsula until, fifteen minutes later, they disappeared among the trees. He calculated that it would be two hours at least before they could get back, so he went into the tent and lay down, listening to the dull thud of the guns.

But he didn't want to listen to the guns; he wanted to listen to Fiona. So he entertained himself with incidents that could happen in a married man's life. Sylvia, for instance. Sylvia refusing to go to school. Now what would he say to a child who refused to go to school? He went on amusing himself with possible answers to situations like that, until finally he ran out of new ideas. And he fell asleep.

When he woke he looked at his watch; it was half pas three. The sound of the guns had stopped and was replaced by a roaring noise which he took to be the sea. He called, "Ackerman, where's that food?" but no one replied, and he didn't have to look outside to convince himself that they hadn't come back. They were probably, he thought, down on the beach watching the shooting; that was just like young Ackerman.

He stood up, pinched the shirt from between his wet shoulder-blades, and went outside.

Then he saw why they hadn't come back.

To the east of Marabou, where the Rock peninsula joined the

mainland, was a low dark cloud, vapouring out thinly against the rear mountains. The peninsula was at least a mile long so he guessed that the fire—it wasn't a cane fire, there were no cane-fields this far south—was pretty big.

As he stood watching it, smoking a cigarette, he heard the field radio crackling. "Able to Baker, Able to Baker . . ." and he went back, sat beside the set, and flicked the switch.

"Baker to Able," he said, watching the smoke. "Yes? Over."

"Where the hell have you been? Sleeping?" He recognized the C.O.'s voice, thin, sharp, angry. "Can't you see that fire?"

Steve flushed. "I was just—"

"Never mind excuses. Listen. That fire's moving fast. We can't bring any trucks through to get the ammunition back, so better get out of there."

"What about the ammo, sir?"

"Never mind the ammo, Lieutenant. We might kill the fire from behind, though I doubt it. Just get back, that's all. Over."

"Right, sir."

He stood up, fastened on his revolver, and went out, mopping his face with a handkerchief. There was no particular hurry, not then.

It wasn't until he made a recce that he saw how the fire was engulfing almost the whole breadth of the peninsula. The inland wind wasn't holding it back at all. He couldn't walk through it or around it. So he walked back along one edge of the cliff and down the other side until he came again to the advancing fire. All he saw were sheer cliffs, rocks below, pounding surf.

He went into the tent and called Battery Headquarters. A Signals private answered, and he had to wait for the C.O.

"Haven't you gone yet?" the C.O. said.

"I'm afraid I can't get off," Steve said, watching the fire through the tent-flap.

"What do you mean, can't get off?"

"The fire's right across the peninsula, sir. Can't get past it or through it. And there's no way down the cliffs. Too steep. Too many rocks."

The C.O. swore irritably. "Just a minute," he said, and Steve heard him talking to someone, probably Ackerman or Blythe, he thought. Then, "Listen, Lieutenant, what about the cliff behind the ammo?"

"That's worse, sir."

"Of course, you realize that if you had been awake, this situation wouldn't have arisen?"

Steve felt his neck go warm. "I know that, sir. I'm sorry."

"I'll call you back. Stay by the set."

"Yes, sir."

He stared at the radio, then his eyes lifted and he listened to the fire; it was still seven or eight hundred yards away but he could hear its machinery-crunching tone, like an animal gnawing. He realized suddenly that it was a lucky thing Ackerman and Blythe hadn't come back after all.

Yet the full danger didn't occur to him. There was really no reason, apart from the sight of the fire itself, to be alarmed. It was a comfortable distance away, and anyway the full resources of the Battery and some of the civilians of Marabou would be fighting it.

But it came to him, about half past four, that the whole thing was going to have unpleasant results, one way or the other. In the first place, the C.O. was furious. And he was likely to become more furious because, Steve reflected, a rescue even at this early stage would entail a major operation: time, money, and anxiety.

For instance, they would need a launch to get him off the rocks, and this assumed the likelihood of his getting down to the rocks at all. Failing that, he wouldn't be surprised to see a helicopter involved. The nearest helicopters were at Brisbane, a hundred miles north.

And lastly—though he couldn't imagine why it should be so—there was Fiona. It seemed unjust that a promise of happiness should be presented to her, only to suffer this early cloud. Because of her, the important thing now, more than at any other time in his life, was to remain alive.

He sat quietly by the radio, waiting, wondering what new ideas the C.O. would offer. He realized then, with slow discomfort, that he had just been thinking of his own death.

At five o'clock the fire was about four hundred yards from the ammunition; it would normally have travelled faster, but a strong wind leapt at it from the sea and stayed the low red tongues. The sight of flame was strangely absent because it fed on the moist undergrowth, drying before it burnt. Now and again he saw a flame leap in the descending dusk, and fall under the cowl of black bellowing smoke. He could smell burning wood.

At ten minutes past five the C.O. was on the radio again; his thin voice squeaked through the crackling interference.

"Now listen, Lieutenant. If you work fast, d'you think you could dig a break at a narrow part of the peninsula? Stop it that way, eh?"

"Afraid not, sir." Steve drew a hand over his brow and the

back of his hand was wet. "There wouldn't be enough time," he said.

"I see. But the fire's a fair distance off, isn't it?"

"About an hour and a half."

"All right, then. Let's review the situation. There's absolutely no way off the Rock, you say? Now listen carefully. D'you think it's possible for you to get halfway, or even part way, down the cliff behind the ammo, so that when the stuff goes up you won't be harmed?"

Steve tried hard to keep his voice patient. "There's no chance of that, sir. When that ammo goes up, the whole of Marabou Rock goes up with it."

"Just a minute now, just a minute, let me think. Yes. Look, Lieutenant, what about trying to throw the boxes down the cliff?"

"I'll try, sir," Steve said wearily, "but, frankly, I don't think I can handle them that fast."

"Oh. Well . . ." The C.O. paused, then, as if detecting a futile note in Steve's tone, he said encouragingly, "Well, hold on, boy. Just you hold on. I'll call you back."

"Yes, sir."

Steve sat in silence.

At half past five the wind from the sea grew more savage and poured itself low into the fire. It drove back the smoke, Steve saw, but the little flames, the hard-working little flames, bit on. At best, they stopped awhile and fed on the young trees, burning right through till the wood was ash, then came on again, chomping, chomping, at the lantana, the grass, the trees, everything.

In front of the ammunition boxes there was a fifty-yard strip of tall, yellow grass and bushes; when the fire reached that, Steve guessed, it would race right up to the ammunition. And that would be the end.

He got up from the radio, went out to the ammunition boxes, and stood looking at them. No harm in trying, he thought, and lifted a corner of the tarpaulin, and pulled a box out. The boxes were of steel, twenty-four shells in a box. He struggled with one of them to the edge of the cliff, and hurled it over. He heard it crash down, then he went back. But he didn't attempt to lift any more of the boxes. It had taken him three minutes to handle one of them. The others were stacked twice his height. And the fire was half an hour away.

Close on a quarter to six the C.O. called him again.

"Well, boy," the C.O. said. "We radioed for a helicopter from Brisbane . . ." The C.O.'s voice sagged wearily. It was a

measure he'd tried to avoid—showed up the army, inefficiency, taxpayers' money.

" Look, sir," Steve said, " I'm sorry about—"

" That's all right," the C.O. said, " these things are sent to try us, could have happened to anybody. How do you feel anyway? Scared? Nervous? "

Steve forced humour into his voice. " Well, I was with demolition boys in the war so I suppose this sort of thing ought to be right up my street."

The C.O. laughed. " That's the spirit, Lieutenant. Anyway, it looks worse than it is." The C.O. paused, then, " By the way, someone here wants to talk to you."

He heard a bump, then her voice came thinly over, as though from the other side of the world.

" Steve? "

" Hullo, sweet." There was a smile in his voice. " Bit of a mess, isn't it? "

" Steve, they've sent for a helicopter."

" Yes, I know." He looked through the tent-flap at the fire, closer now, and his grip tightened on the set. " Look, Fiona. A lot of people are trying to stop this fire, but . . ." He took a deep breath. " Darling, I honestly don't think it can be done."

" Don't say that, Steve."

" It's no use, Fiona." He looked at the fire again, bellowing dark in the afternoon sky. " It's got the wind behind it. The fire'll be here in fifteen minutes. I just want to tell you . . ."

But Fiona paid no attention to him; that was a quality he hadn't yet known her well enough to appreciate. " We're going round to the Rock now," she said, anxiety touching her tone. " We'll find a way."

And the radio was switched off . . .

Five minutes later he saw them on the beach. A jeep came along and four people got out, one was Fiona. Someone shouted up, and he recognized the C.O.'s piping voice.

" Can you jump? "

Steve went to the edge of the cliff and cupped his hands to his mouth. " Impossible! " he shouted.

" You might only break a leg! "

" Not a chance. Rocks! Too many rocks! "

The figures hesitated, then went quickly back to the jeep. He watched them go and disappointment tugged in his stomach. It seemed the last chance.

But ten minutes later, when the fire was less than fifty yards from the ammunition, two jeeps returned to the same spot and eight people got out. They were carrying oblong-shaped objects

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GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

—New Thriller

Breathtaking new novel of suspense by the author of Rogue Male. Set in the English country, it is the story of a duel between a cunning, ruthless killer and his keen-witted victim:

TIE UP A GOAT

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to the rocks below the cliff where he was standing. In the half-dark he saw their torches flashing below.

Then the C.O.'s voice drifted up again. "Can you see?"

"See what?"

"Mattresses."

Heavens, he thought, what a time for—

"Where?" he shouted.

"Listen—" There was silence, then he heard them talking to each other. Then, "Can you climb down farther and jump?"

He whirled and looked round him. The little advance fires were licking at the bottom of the tarpaulin which was already smouldering. He thought, I've got to.

"I'm coming!" he shouted.

He started. He couldn't see where he was going. He neither sensed nor saw any holds. The brightness of the fire cast all else into dark. He remembered vaguely a part of the cliff that had a fair angle to a ledge. He recognized the shape of it now under his body. As he slid down, he saw the sky all orange with firelight and he heard it in the earth. Any time now, he thought. His toes cringed in his boots as he touched the ledge he really hadn't expected to be there.

Where to now? He felt a branch yield under his boot. He slid his boot past it, and took the branch with his hands. It was strong. He slid past, depending on the branch. It held. That was good, that was twenty feet. Another ten feet and maybe he could see the mattresses and jump. He heard voices below, shouting encouragement, but they still seemed so far away.

And then it happened.

A sharp crack, then another, and another increasing in rapidity till they fused into one long roar, and the sky went yellow and white. The colour seemed to have a noise, a scream of its own.

The whole top of the Rock was blasting apart. He pressed his body to the cliff face; he heard large boulders thundering down and over him though they didn't touch him, and away in the distance he heard splashes and human cries. He thought suddenly of Fiona; was she down there? But he couldn't look. They seemed to go on and on, the rocks, the splashes, the cries. Small stones chipped bitterly down on his fingers till they bled and he thought he was holding on with his bones.

Even when it was all over and there was only the comparatively soft, lost murmur of the fire burning itself out on the Rock above, he didn't take his face from the cliff for a long time. He looked up only when he heard voices.

The Rock seemed lowered by about ten feet and he could see faces, closer to him than he had imagined: officers, men, ropes,

and hands, and then the sensation of going up again to that place from where he had so desperately striven to escape.

When he opened his eyes he was surprised to discover that, although he was lying on a stretcher, he was unharmed. Around him the air was dark with smoke. Here and there small flames worked furiously; but the whole peninsula was grey with ash and, even as he watched, the fires fluttered out, one after another.

At the foot of the Rock stood an ambulance, but no one hurried; there was no need.

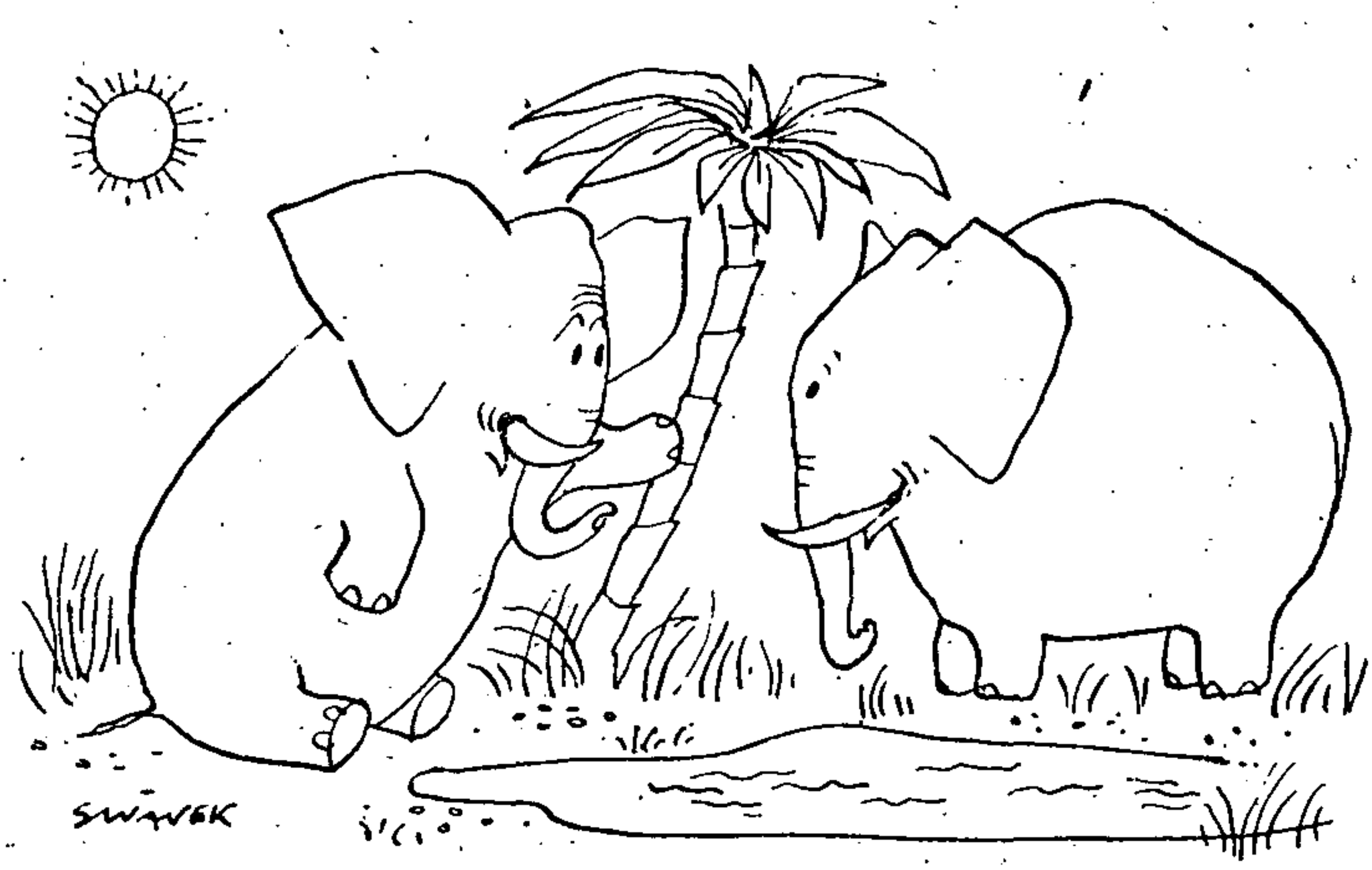
The Battery Medical Officer, an old man with a red face and white moustache, sat beside him on the running board of a car, shaking his head. " You must have gone through hell," he said.

Steve looked at him. " It was a bit hot," he said, starting to grin. " Where's the C.O.? He's the man I expected to see."

" He's dead." The Medical Officer started packing his equipment. " He was arranging the mattresses on the rocks, didn't get out of the way in time." He got into the car. " You're all right, soldier. You're lucky."

" He's right, Steve," Fiona said, and for the first time he realized she had been bathing his head while the Medical Officer spoke to him.

He turned round and saw she had been crying. " I thought," he said, " I thought *I* was the unlucky one." But when her hand touched his, and when he lifted his head and saw the black, devastated desolation of Marabou Rock, he realized with a cold shiver just how lucky he had been. © Richard Clapperton 1958



" I keep on seeing lots and lots of pink men."

GRIM FAIRY TALE

In the rain-slashed, ancient forest
I was suddenly unreasonably afraid

BY EDITH PARGETER

LOOKING back now, I realize that I ought to have smelt a rat right from the start. If I hadn't been as vain as I was green, I should have wondered what ever possessed my boss to take me with him on that business trip across Europe, when he had so many older and abler men at his disposal. My driving was all right, but certainly no better than Smith's or Davidson's, and I couldn't speak a word of German, while Brent was completely bilingual, and they were all senior to me.

But at the time, of course, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that Mr. Fordyce should choose me; so it never occurred to me that the real difference between Smith and Davidson and me was that they were married, and I was single.

Mr. Fordyce had a daughter. Lilian was coming with us as far as Cologne, where she was going to spend the two weeks of her father's business jaunt with friends of the family, and we were to pick her up again on the drive home. I didn't see anything fishy in that, either. She seemed a nice girl, and I never noticed anything peculiar about her, such as her being twenty-eight. I was twenty-two myself, and rather partial to the company of girls older than myself, because they were better listeners. All across France and Belgium I enjoyed having my driving admired —so intelligently, too—and my ego gently groomed by Lilian's approbation, and I really missed her when she left us at Cologne.

From then on I don't know which of us talked more about her, her father or me. He must have been rubbing his hands, because everything was going according to plan, and knowing what he knew, he must have been willing to bet I was as good as hooked. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been better . . . I might have been very happy, and I should almost certainly have been comfortably off, because he was the sort to do the right thing by his son-in-law.

But of course, after that night everything was different. I don't know that I had any choice, after that night.

We were a whole week in Frankfurt, where Franz Eisner, the

firm's chief agent in Germany, had his office. Then we went on to Stuttgart and Munich, and back by way of Nuremberg. And it was in Nuremberg, when we had just two days to get back to Cologne and pick up Lilian, that Mr. Fordyce got a telegram, and announced that a big deal with Canada was coming up unexpectedly, and it was by way of being an emergency, and he'd have to fly back to England immediately. Leaving me to drive the car back across Germany, pick up the girl, and escort her safely home. Which he had no doubt I could do admirably. Stephen Dalloway was the white-headed boy all right, while it lasted.

I had no doubts, either. I felt a few inches taller, and quite complacent at the idea of two days or more tête-à-tête with Lilian, but probably not as complacent as he felt at the way the bait had gone down. It was only after I'd seen him off that I had time to remember little things like my complete lack of German; and the fact that I should have to drive and navigate at the same time, on roads I didn't know, and through cities where the traffic had put the fear of God into me even on the way out, when I'd had the boss and all his experience right at my elbow.

Still, I wasn't the sort to have qualms about my own capabilities. To my way of thinking, there wasn't much I couldn't do, given the opportunity. And of course, it was flattering to have it taken for granted that I could be relied on to manage the journey across Europe like an old hand. I had visions of a distinguished future, Stephen Dalloway, Continental representative of Fordyce's, comfortably installed in Franz Eisner's office in Frankfurt.

It was afternoon when I started, owing to my having to see the boss off at the airport, but it was only two hundred and twenty kilometres to Frankfurt, and from there to Cologne by the autobahn is a morning stroll. I'd memorized the map beforehand, and in any case you'd have hard work to lose yourself between Nuremberg and Würzburg, because once you light out westward across the face of Germany there's virtually nowhere else to go. I'd decided not to stay overnight in Frankfurt itself, but to stop short of it by the odd few kilometres, and sleep in Hanau, so as to face the city in the morning, when I was fresh and at my best.

I had a bit of a cold, just come out that morning, but it was nothing much to bother about, and the sun was shining, and altogether I felt pretty good.

By five o'clock that afternoon things didn't look quite so cheerful. The sky clouded over early, and turned the colour of lead, and there was thunder rolling round on my left flank. Then I picked up a five-inch nail which was just one of the things I'd

forgotten to allow for, and it fetched me up on the grass verge of the road, shaken and irritated. And while I was changing the wheel the rain began—not thunder rain yet, just a nasty, wetting drizzle that gradually grew heavier, and had me feeling cold and clammy before I had the sense to grope in the back of the car for my raincoat.

I didn't know the car well enough to have the drill to numbers, and the job took me longer than it should have done. And before I'd gone ten miles farther, my other back tyre ripped itself open on a piece of glass.

I had to walk two miles into Neustadt to find a garage, and it rained hard all the way, and when I got there it took me twenty minutes of exhaustion to make myself understood.

Once they'd grasped the situation they made short work of fetching in the car, patching the inner tube that was still worth patching, and selling me a replacement for the other; but even so, it meant that I had to kick my heels in Neustadt for two hours, and it was past six when I got on my way again.

All it meant was that I should have to drive later than I'd intended. I put up the best speed I could, but towards evening that road is infested with enormous heavies, eight-wheelers and worse, and they drive hell for leather, and take an age to pass, so the whole run into Würzburg was tough on my nerves, even apart from the falling dusk, which seems to come inordinately early there by English standards, and the frequent and fierce thunder showers.

If I hadn't already been somewhat daunted I don't suppose I should have picked up the hitch-hiker with the Union Jack on his rucksack, who thumbed me hopefully outside the village of Enzlar. He had a beard, and glasses, and hobnailed boots, a discoloured windjacket, and about half a ton of impedimenta dangling round him, camera, tape-recorder, everything you can think of. I suppose he was rising fifty, and deadly serious. Not my type. But he was advertising the fact that he was British, which meant that he could at least talk English to me, and prevent me from going completely melancholy for want of a human voice.

He talked! The first thing he told me was that he'd come all across Europe without walking more than two miles at a stretch, which made me want to ask why he needed the boots. I'd hoped he was going all the way to Aschaffenburg or Frankfurt, but he was only bound for Kitzingen, on the near side of Würzburg.

"Where are you spending the night?" he asked me, hoping I'd stay in Kitzingen, too, and take him on with me next day.

"Hanau," I told him firmly. It might have been sensible to

draw in my horns and settle for somewhere nearer, but I was determined not to alter my plans just for a run of bad luck.

I knew what he'd say, and he said it. Straight out of the guide-book. For that matter, it's the only thing there is to say about Hanau. "Ah, the birthplace of the brothers Grimm!" he said, beaming at me with queer, light, opaque eyes; and he began to talk about the folk-lore of fairy tales with the gusto of a devotee.

I'd always thought Grimm's fairy stories a pretty grisly collection of horror comics in their own right, but this fellow knew exactly how sinister they really are when considered in all their implications. And what he knew he meant to share with me. The sky sank low over our heads, copper and lead in mottled patches, the darkness came down hours before its time, and the thunder rolled along mile for mile with us on our left quarter, and slashed at us with vicious scuds of rain. And this fellow talked. Like a book.

"You know, of course, what the dwarfs and ogres and gnomes of fairy stories really are, don't you? They date from the dawn of history, when new races were sweeping westward out of the Danube valley. They're the new people's view of the old, the survivors of the old civilization depressed and submerged into decline, pushed out of the fat lands into the hills and forests, where living is hard and precarious. They're the relics of submerged peoples, dispossessed gods, outmoded cults. The stories turn them into grotesques, shrunken in stature, ugly, wicked, because the people who made the stories were afraid of them still. They made them malevolent because they knew they'd given them reason for hatred, reason to be inimical and vengeful. And they *are* malevolent—they *do* hate—they *are* inimical and vengeful. Because they have reason to be."

His eyes glowed at me gleefully. He talked as if the old war was still going on, and all the guerillas of innumerable doomed races were lurking in ambush for stragglers from among their supplanters, not half a mile from the road.

"Or of course, in the ultimate analysis," he said blithely, "they're the spirits of the dead, who are also dispossessed and submerged, and have reason to bear a grudge against the living. In either case, they're to be feared and avoided at all costs. And all those princesses, and elder brothers, and younger sons who fall into their clutches in the stories—well, in the stories they're always rescued in the end, of course. But how do we know how many of the dominant race went missing to provide all those legends? And *weren't* rescued?"

When I dropped him at last in Kitzingen I had a furious

headache, and a mind full of monsters. I've never been so glad to get rid of a passenger in my life.

"It'll be pretty late when you cross the Spessart hills," he gloated at me through his ginger beard as he took his leave. "I often think many of the wildest Grimm stories must have come out of those forests. Only a few miles from Aschaffenburg and Hanau, and yet you might be in another world and another age. There are places, you know, where the veil is very thin. Spessart always seemed to me to be one of them."

He went off dangling his plethora of equipment and hunched under his enormous rucksack, and in the half darkness he looked like one of his own ogres.

As for me, I crept through Würzburg feeling uncommonly miserable, and along the narrow road under the ominous shadow of the Marienburg, and out into the rain-soaked countryside again. By eight it was dark, pitch dark because of the low and heavy clouds which brought the night down on me untimely. Then the real thunderstorms began, streaming with rain until there seemed no air to breathe between the slashing jets of it, and visibility was nil.

I slowed down to a timorous crawl, and edged along by feel, through sudden pools that tried to tug me to a standstill. It was plain night now, and a black night, too, hot and heavy and crushing, so that even between the rain storms the very air seemed solid.

I should have stopped. I should have had sense enough to settle for the pub in the nearest village. But I went obstinately on, determined not to give in to my luck. And in the Spessart hills I lost my way.

After you pass the well-known Spessart inn it's forest, forest all the way, rising and falling with the road, and not a solitary house to be seen in miles of it. It was pouring with rain again, my head was thudding like a steam hammer, and all I could see by my headlights was drowning, drenching streams of water, and occasionally the merest glimpse of the long, unchanging procession of tree-trunks on either side. The road was a river, and had narrowed considerably on this stretch, so that I didn't notice for some time how extreme this narrowing process had become, or how bad the surface was; and exactly how and where I left the road I shall never know.

But at last I realized that there were no more heavies, and that was odd. Whatever my speed, I should either have overtaken one or two, or been myself overtaken. But now there were no more lorries. There were no more cars at all. Nothing but the Ford and me.

I was afraid to stop my engine, so I kept going, but wound down my window and stuck my head out into the saturated darkness. There wasn't a solitary sound left in the world except the indignant note of the car and the slashing fall of the rain. Then the rain stopped, and all round me I could feel the silence pressing in, and the darkness, and the wet, green, earthy, ancient smell of the forest. And I was afraid. Not of being lost, not of an uncomfortable night in the car, not of anything comprehensible or reasonable, just afraid. Perhaps of the immensity and antiquity of the world outside the tiny shell of the car, and of the insignificance and ephemeral nature of the car and its driver, those intruders from a new world. A world which thought it had displaced the ancient one, a world from which I was now a straggler, and vulnerable.

I knew it was nonsense, but the knowledge resided in a part of my brain, the reasoning part, which had shrunk into a corner and assumed the defensive. All the rest of my mind moved now irrationally, by instinct, memory, hypersensitive touch.

I told myself that the rough track on which I found myself was bound to lead somewhere, to a village, or at least a clearing where there would be a house, or to another road which, since I was not conscious of having changed direction in any considerable degree, would surely bring me to Aschaffenburg. So I went on, creeping gingerly along the sodden wheel-ruts as the track grew greener and narrower; but all the intuitive part of my mind, quivering with outspread tentacles like the hair erected on a frightened man's head, stretched outward into the primeval darkness and fended off terror. The old things, the buried things, came into their own by night and in solitude. How many of the dominant race have vanished, to provide all those legends? Cut off from their kind, astray from their daylight world, like me . . .

That was when the car rocked suddenly sideways into a bigger hole than usual, and grind away as I might I couldn't get it out again. I got out to try to push it clear, and it did move on to an even keel, but then the engine died on me, and I couldn't start it again. I was quaking with exhaustion, fever, fury, and fright when I stopped shoving to wipe the rain out of my eyes and peer ahead through the sighing darkness; and somewhere, small and distant between the trees, I saw a glimmer of light, steady light, like the glow from a window.

I don't know why it wasn't immediately reassuring. But I know that it wasn't. The hair rose on my neck and scalp with foreboding. And yet I went forward towards the light, between the thinning trees.

The obstinate rational corner in my mind was still functioning. This must be a house, it said, go and ask where you are, and how to get back on the road to Aschaffenburg and Hanau. And I did what it told me to do, though I didn't believe in its reasoning. I went straight towards the window, for it was certainly a window. There was no clearing to be seen, just a low fence erupting quite suddenly in the streaming gloom, and a bushy, tangled garden, and then the long, low huddle of the house, hardly distinguishable from the surrounding darkness of trees and night.

Only two storeys, with a verandah all along the upper face and a flight of wooden steps leading up to it from one end. A squat, secret, unwelcoming house, low-browed behind its bushes, unbelievably solitary and sinister. A shaded light in one upper window, and that unshaded one below. I walked up to the fence, and there was a little gate in it, lolling open on a broken hinge. I went through into the garden, among the dripping bushes, and crept closer to the house.

It was then that a door opened in the dark face, and let out a flood of light into the garden; and in the light, a grotesque little black silhouette stood, a figure I didn't care to think of as human, though its movements caricatured the motions of man.

I saw no features, only a shape. There was a huge head, sunken into thick shoulders, a paunchy body that tapered off into skinny little bowed legs. The creature was about three feet high, for it came only halfway up the lighted frame of the door. It stood a moment looking out into the night, and then it went in and shut the door. There wasn't any doubt about it. I hadn't imagined it. It was there, and it was alive.

I don't know what it is in a man that can drive him forward towards something that threatens and terrifies him. Not courage. Courage ought to be reasoning and reasonable, ought to have an objective. There was every reason in the world why I should turn and run for it, feeling the way I felt, and no reason at all why I should creep shivering through the wet bushes towards that lighted window.

But that's what I did. Curiosity must be a passion as strong and fundamental as love, to hold its own with the sort of panic terror I felt blazing up in me. I was incandescent with it, my erected hair giving off sparks into the darkness, all my skin tensed and burning with its heat. And yet I was crawling through the tangled branches, soaked, shuddering, my knees quaking under me, drawn to the window as to a magnet.

The house waited for me, quiescent, biding its time. I reached out and touched the wall beneath the window, drew myself up, and looked into the room.

There were six of them. In that little, wood-panelled, ancient brown room, six of them, sitting some at a table, some with their backs to the green-tiled stove with its sunken radiation eyes. One of them was smoking a short briar pipe. One, the one I'd seen in the doorway, was just closing the door of the room behind him, and now I saw his face, and it was ugly, tragic, and ferocious. Two of the others were females. The word women didn't occur to me in connection with them. They were thick-bodied, neckless, with gross lips and broad noses. I swear not one of them was taller than the first.

All the voids in my racial memory, all those dark hollows of ignorance that might so easily, so horribly be peopled after all, swelled into one darkness and filled the night for me. The antique darkness in which the enemy lurked still, and still was dominant, the territory where the daylight laws of reason and credibility were not current, gripped and held and contained me. For my reason denied this, but my senses recorded it. The forest house was full of dwarfs. The very air outside its confines was heavy with their tragedy and hatred.

In the stories, you'll remember, the hero still advances, that indestructible inquisitiveness overcoming his fear even when he knows his enemy. Now I know it can happen, because it went on happening to me. I'd seen them, and still there was something else I had to see. In that upstairs room, too, there was a subdued light burning. I felt along the wall until I reached the wooden staircase to the gallery, and step by step, clinging to the wood with cold hands, I climbed it, and edged my way to the window. The sill was low, and one half of the window was slightly open, so that a draught stirred the drawn curtains. I put my hand in, and parted the curtains an inch or two, just enough to peer in.

A little lamp, heavily shaded, was burning on a small table beside the bed. It filled all the centre of the room, that bed, and its down quilt billowed like a white, bulbous cloud. Beneath the cloud a girl lay asleep.

She lay on her back, her arms relaxed at her sides, her pure profile bright under the gleam of the lamp. The face was motionless, withdrawn from the world. Long dark lashes lay on the pale cheeks, the soft lips were raised tenderly to the leaning air. Over the pillow, over the bed, her long, long, golden hair streamed unbound. She was more beautiful than I can ever tell you, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Her breathing was deep, regular, and slow, her face marble. She slept an unmoving, an enchanted sleep, there in the house of the enemy. And unless someone awoke her and took her away, there she would sleep for ever.

I had no doubts left in me at all. There was no part of that nightmare of the race that I could not believe. There were places, there were times in the darkness, when the old world reached out after its revenges. There was magical death, and magical damnation. The loveliest, the youngest and best was always the desired prize.

So it was up to me. You can see that. And you'll understand why I unhasped the open window, and climbed into the room, and went and knelt beside the bed, touching her fingers, whispering into her ear, imploring her to awake before it was too late. No noise—there must be no noise. Even to touch her was dangerous. Supposing she should be startled, and cry out, and *they* should hear?

There was a perfume in her hair and about her skin that made my senses fail, and now that I was close beside her, her face was so beautiful that the tears came into my eyes. Are tears a waking magic? One actually fell on to her cheek, but she did not move. And then I remembered what I had to do. Of course, there is only one way, the old, the time-honoured way to awaken sleeping princesses.

I bent my head, and kissed her on the soft, uplifted mouth. It was like a little death. Everything I had been faded and declined in me, burning out, and something new and wondering and unsure, but clear and good, slowly generated and grew in me to replace it. And before I had lifted my lips from hers I felt the long lashes sweeping my cheek, brushing through my lashes. She opened her eyes, which were as darkly blue as gentians in an Alpine meadow, and looked at me, all dewy and astonished and direct as a child, and slowly, marvellously, she began to smile.

And I, drawing back a little from my too impious nearness to her, knocked over the table and the lamp together, and the lamp went out.

Beneath us there was a savage, alarmed outcry of voices, and a clashing of doors, and feet thudded wildly on the stairs, heavy, hasty feet, as the dwarfs came raging to retrieve their treasure.

Groping through the darkness, crying aloud to her to come with me, and I would save her, I caught at her hand, and for an instant I swear those soft, cool fingers folded gently upon mine. Then the door of the room burst open and they came swarming in, the powers of evil; small, heavy, loathsome, they poured over me, clinging about my legs, climbing up my body, battering at me, and screaming in harsh angry voices.

I fought my way across the room, trying to sweep them away from her bed, but their weight dragged me down, and their heat clinging to my sweating body was awful, unbearable. I tried to

shake them off, but they dragged at my feet and brought me down, and then they were all over me, and I was stifling, dying. Something exploded inside my aching head. Even the darkness went out.

I came to life again, if it was life, lying on a stone floor. My body was ice-cold, but my head was filled with molten metal, so heavy that I could not move it even to ease the pain. At first I thought I was encircled by a ring of tiny fires, then I saw that they were eyes watching me. All the dwarfs were crouched round me, staring; and one of them, who sat beside my left shoulder, held a misshapen, veinous hand above my heart, poising a long, thin knife.

They did not move, nor often speak. They just sat there, and watched me. I kept my eyelids lowered, peering stealthily through my lashes, so that they should think me still unconscious, asleep, dead, whatever it was they conceived my state to be. I saw that the door of the room stood ajar, and that there were stars in the sliver of sky I could see beyond. I regained a tiny, feeble flickering of hope, because there were stars again. The world had not entirely abandoned itself to the ancient evil.

And I remembered her, the inexpressibly beautiful, the captive, the victim, charmed again to sleep in the room above, and knew that I had to get away from here alive, in order that she might live again. Whether I could or no, I had to escape and bring help for her.

I did not know yet if I could move, and dared not try it, because the least tension of my arm would be seen at once, and surprise was the one weapon I had. But between me and the door there was only the dwarf with the knife. If he would once look away from me I might attempt it.

I am not brave. I don't know how to account for the fiery and despairing calm with which I contemplated this act of hopeless defiance. I think it was her eyes, newly opened still in my mind's eye, that drowned in their deep blueness the fierce, thin blue of the knife blade. I waited, watching the slight movements it made above my chest, praying for it to be withdrawn, only for a moment.

Then the door was pushed open, and a giant came in out of the night. I felt no surprise. No prodigy could surprise me any more. Only the normal, only daylight, and traffic, and a man shaped like other men could have astonished me now. This man looked enormous, towering above me, towering above the dwarfs, talking to them in a deep, resonant voice, in some language I could not recognize even as German. He had a pointed beard, and

high-arched brows, and a handsome, angry face like a devil's, famished and corroded with rage. He stared at me, and swept through to some inner room, and the door closed behind him.

One more apparition out of the submerged world, cast up through the rift of night and storm and solitude. But when he spoke they all listened, and when he had passed they turned to look after him. Even the dwarf with the knife. It was the only moment I could hope for, and I took it. I reached up and caught him by the wrist and, springing up, jerked him backwards off his perch, and jumped over him, and ran.

The shrilling of their voices and clutching of their hands were like a wind that blew me onward, and the pain that filled me was like a fire burning its way forward over a dry plain, and sweeping me with it. I hit the edge of the door blindly, and wrenched it open, and fell into the night; and ran, and ran, and ran, leaping aside from bushes, ducking under the branches of trees, jumping over sodden hollows, fending myself off with outstretched arms from the trunks of trees.

I heard the hunt pour out of the house after me, saw light streaming from door and window for a few minutes, and then sound and light fell far behind me, and I was running off the ground, floating, drifting effortlessly through a void, almost without pain any longer. For a long time, it seemed. A very long time. An eternity.

After that I remember a road under my feet, quite suddenly, out of nowhere, and two lights gleaming like eyes on its wet, silver surface, and voices, and men tumbling out from the brain behind the eyes. I remember falling through miles of air into long arms, and gasping out my story and my appeal, between breaths that hurt me clean through to the heart, as though the knife had transfixed me at last. I remember a face above me, big white teeth and great, astonished eyes, and a deep, soft voice uttering sounds of reassurance in English.

"All right, son. All right, now, take it easy!" the incredible voice was purring. And the face—it seemed only the last fantasy of the night to me that this face should be black.

I went down, fathoms deep, into the blueness of remembered gentian eyes, and in the depths there was darkness and silence.

When I came to myself, I was lying in a bed in an American military hospital in Aschaffenburg, where the negro highway patrol had rushed me in the jeep that night; and Franz Eisner was sitting by my bed, as round and rosy and ordinary as ever, beaming at me through his thick glasses.

He patted my shoulder, and fed me grapes, and told me where

I was, and how I'd got there. And all the time I wanted to know only one thing, the single thing that mattered.

"Did they find her?" I asked, hearing a thin voice that hardly seemed to be mine. "Did they get there in time? Did they find the girl?"

An odd, embarrassed smile flickered over his face, but he said soothingly, "Oh yes, they found her."

"So I did manage to tell a straight tale before I passed out! Thank God! And she's all right?"

"She's quite all right," he said. "Don't worry about anything, everything's being taken care of. Miss Fordyce has gone home by plane—you've been here four days, you know, and only just missed pneumonia. You were running a tremendous fever when they brought you in. And the car's all right, don't worry about the car, I've got it in the office garage in Frankfurt. When they found it they found your briefcase and papers in it, of course, and that's why they sent for me. All you've got to do is lie still and get well, and leave everything else to me."

"Where is she?" I demanded. "I must see her!"

"She?"

"You said they found her!" I cried, alarmed again. "Temperature or no temperature, fever or no fever, I didn't make her up, or the dwarfs, either, or the giant."

"Yes, well—yes, Stephen, they did find her. And the—the dwarfs and the giant, too. You see, my dear Stephen," said Franz, taking the plunge, "the giant had sent for the police himself. He said some foreigner had broken into his daughter's bedroom and assaulted her, and then escaped from the dwarfs who were guarding him, and got away in the woods. But he calmed down when he heard that some half-delirious Englishman had been picked up by an American highway patrol, babbling at them to go and rescue a princess who was being held captive by monsters in a hut in the forest.

"He saw the joke," said Franz gently, "and Fräulein Ulla saw it, too. They dropped all charges against you at once. You've nothing to worry about."

What he saw in my face I daren't guess, but he went on talking, which was kind of him. How I'd been unlucky in blundering on the inn from the forest side, how I should have seen the car park, and the telephone wires, and the parked wagons, and all the evidences of blessed, everyday modernity, if only I'd found my way to it by the village road . . .

"But they *were* dwarfs," I cried, trembling, "not above three feet high, any one of them! And the other man, the big one—he was tall as the ceiling—"

"He *is* a very tall man," agreed Franz soothingly, "nearly two metres, I know, I've met and talked to him. And if you were lying on the floor, as it seems you were . . . and of course, after the others he would seem enormous. They *could* be rather frightening, those midgets of his, seen without warning, offstage like that—"

"And the knife was real," I persisted. "I touched it, I know it was real!"

"Oh, yes, the knife would be real enough. They were genuinely alarmed, you know. Schmidt throws them—the knives, I mean. He runs Loeffler's Midgets and his own knife-throwing act. And Fräulein Ulla . . ."

I was getting the hang of it at last.—I said flatly, "She's the target."

"Well, yes. But they wouldn't have touched you with it, you know, it was only meant to keep you quiet until the police came. The group always call in at that inn when they're heading for Frankfurt. Schmidt's sister keeps it. She's the widow of a lion-tamer who used to be with the same circus."

He looked at me with sympathy, and didn't laugh; I've always been grateful to him for that. "The little fellows don't look so bad by daylight," he said, "and still better, of course, when they're dressed up for the ring. But they always give me the creeps, too, I don't mind admitting."

"I seem to have made a complete fool of myself," I said bleakly.

"Oh, I don't know! Coming on them by accident, as you did, and in the state you were in, who could blame you?"

He hesitated, and then added somewhat constrainedly, "Fräulein Ulla didn't. She sent you a letter."

My hands were shaking so much I could hardly open it. The single sheet of notepaper was headed from Willy Isserstedt's Circus, Frankfurt, three days previously. It had her scent clinging to it, the breath of a rose, of a memory, of a true fairy tale. I had to ask Franz to translate the few lines for me.

Stephen, she had written, *the treasure you left with me I keep and guard for you until you return. Use these three charms I send you, and by day or by night you may come safely to me, and claim your own again. Ulla.*

The three charms were three tickets for the circus. The performance at Frankfurt was already past, the one at Koblenz was too soon for me to hope to make it, but the ticket for Cologne I could have used. And three is always the magical number, the number of success. And the tone of her letter, its directness, its teasing, its tenderness, ought to have drawn me to her across a world. A daylight world or a dangerous nocturnal world.

But I didn't go. I was too young, too sore, too ashamed to be able to face her. So I made a bigger fool of myself than ever, and hurried back to England as soon as I was fit, and even tried for a little while to make up to Fordyce and Lilian for the way I'd let them down. But I couldn't have gone through with it, even if they'd encouraged me, and they didn't. There was a distinct chill in the air, young Stephen wasn't the white-headed boy any longer.

I left Fordyce's a few months later, and took a job with a firm that does even bigger business with Germany. And I'm learning German for all I'm worth. Some day I'll even be able to understand that outlandish Bavarian dialect.

Because I'm going back there. I'm going to do what I wish I'd had the courage to do then, find her and ask her for my own again. Maybe I shall be too late, maybe in daylight and without the terror her eyes won't be so blue or her hair so golden. Maybe I shall seem so insignificant to her on a second view that she'll laugh at me, as she didn't laugh then. But I've got to try. I've got to know.

Somewhere in Germany Willy Isserstedt's Circus must still be wandering, and if I search long enough I shall find it. In fairy tales every search ends in finding. And this time not her six-foot-six-inch father nor all his three-foot midgets are going to frighten me away from her.

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SHARP PRACTICE

Even if you are sharp-witted or a natural genius, we flatter ourselves that practice will make you still more perfect, so whet your wits and put your nose to the grindstone ; if the sparks won't fly, turn to the answers on page 40.

1. *Who wrote: The Moon and Sixpence; A Shilling for Candles; The Dollar Princess; Pomes, penyeach?*
2. *What is: Orion's Belt; Deianeira's shirt; Medicine Hat?*
3. *Who is a Next Friend?*
4. *Can you identify:*
   - *i. Nummulite—bird, fossil, or Hebrew tribe?*
   - *ii. Polemarch—Scottish game, Greek military officer, wild animal?*
   - *iii. Saluki—Arab vessel, breed of dog, character in Il Seraglio?*
   - *iv. Phalanger—sweetmeat, pretended illness, marsupial?*
5. *Why do sailors wear square collars?*
6. *What is a: standing order; running bowline; jumping mouse?*
7. *What part of an aircraft is a Mickey Mouse?*

CHINESE TURTLE

In such an eminent position
a man need not want for pleasure

BY LESLIE BONNET

AS he had bidden, Second Concubine came to Chiang Ta Fu on the second watch of the night. In his chamber great lamps of rape-oil shed a yellow radiance upon hangings of wild-coloured silks.

This second one was a plump damsel, wide-eyed with willingness, from the far province of Hunan. When she prostrated herself Chiang took off his spectacles that his eyes might enjoy her precious beauty.

The lamps had paled in the milk-light of dawn when this young woman arose, as First Concubine had arisen before her, and pattered meekly from her lord's chamber. Chiang lay back upon his couch and indulged in agreeable reflections.

Until seven days ago, Chiang Ta Fu had had but his one wife and she, by the malice of Heaven, had proved to be an overpowering person. Chiang had been a man with cause for complaint, but with little encouragement to express it.

In spite of the fact that Chiang could read, and write also, this unruly woman had refused to pay him the respect due even to an unlearned husband. Alone in his bookshop, Chiang was a grave, elderly person worthy of deference. Behind the shop in his own apartments he was only too used to having his horn spectacles knocked off his nose, and to being described as an old turtle.

The reference to the turtle was wounding. It rose from the circumstance that this creature was popularly believed to possess amazing amatory appetites. The Goodwife Chiang had no such relish for homely delights; nor had she for such inclinations in others.

As a consequence it was but rarely that Chiang was permitted those wholesome familiarities that he knew his friends regarded as routine; and even then he was treated more as a child given sugar-cane to stop it crying than as a member of the dominant sex in the applauded exercise of his powers. Afraid to resort to violence, for his wife was of a stout build and very hasty with her blows, Chiang could do little but complain aloud of his deprivations;

and out of these complaints arose the epithet, " turtle," which was so frequently thrown at him.

Chiang naturally took his grievances to the tea-house and begged his friends to advise him. But all their advice availed nothing, being either beyond his powers or repugnant to the desires of a person of fine feeling.

The years went on. There was scarce a one in the city who did not know of Chiang's keen sense of frustration.

He, poor creature, would, when business in his bookshop permitted, roam the crowded streets imagining romance. Many a fine lady, stepping daintily into painted palanquin, would have been astonished to know on what terms she was with Chiang, in his fevered mind.

And then, one day—a still, hot day of the seventh month—as Chiang Ta Fu walked unhappily through the Street of the Workers in Bronze, a young woman beckoned to him.

This exceedingly indecorous action filled Chiang with tumult. His face darkened with embarrassment. He quickened his pace. With hands that trembled he unwrapped his horn spectacles and put them on his nose so that this young person should see that he was a man of some consequence.

He forbade himself to look round. Nevertheless, when he had pushed through the press of people, he did permit himself to loiter while watching a bronzesmith beating out a pan. This would show that, though he was devoted to correct behaviour, yet he was free from foolish fear.

And as he loitered, watching the street through the corners of his eyes, a voice like a silver bell addressed him from behind his right shoulder. " May this insignificant person accost the estimable bookshop-keeper, Chiang? "

Chiang turned round as lightly as if he had been hanging by the neck on a rope. He saw before him the same young woman who had gestured to him.

Chiang thought that she was the roundest, most delectable person he had ever seen. She wore a tight gown of green satin that looked as if she must surely soon outgrow it. Her black eyes were smiling; her full lips pouted prettily.

Chiang was completely taken aback. He could not converse with a strange young person here in the open street. His face must have shown his thoughts, for with a lovely and wanton toss of her head the girl invited him to follow her; and slipped away with neat steps down the street.

Shaking with excitement, Chiang pursued, taking off his spectacles so that he could see the way. Down the street, then off to the left along the passageway. As Chiang turned into it,

he saw her standing by a doorway. She went in. When Chiang reached the spot the door was open.

At home that evening Chiang made no complaints. Indeed he was so cheerful and obliging that his wife gave him a grievous cuff because of sheer bewilderment.

The name of the girl whom Chiang had thus met was Yu Ying, and her family name was Feng. Chiang readily understood how much she felt in need of the protection of a man of age and learning. Chiang himself needed only the submissiveness of a young person so perfectly adapted for the joyful passing of leisure hours.

It was a time for Chiang of inexpressible happiness. His self-esteem expanded so gratefully under the sweet adulation of Yu Ying that he earned many a buffet in his own home because of overbearing demeanour.

Not all Chiang's visits to the little room off the Street of the Workers in Bronze were as sweetly rewarded. Sometimes it happened that three young men and another young woman would be there. Then Yu Ying would smile in a conspiratorial manner at Chiang; and he, quick to understand, would put on his spectacles and join in refined conversation.

Even these experiences were flattering to him. His advice was sought on matters of seriousness. Chiang soon came to understand that these bold young persons were dissatisfied with the government of the city. He would smile, of course, in a tolerant manner when opinions of violence were uttered. Yu Ying's eyes would seek his on such occasions, reminding him of conduct just as violent in its own delightful way in this very room. This would confuse him, and he would cough and take off his spectacles and polish them on the long sleeve of his gown.

At such chance meetings, anxious for the visitors to be gone, and fearful of detaining them by dispute, it is likely that Chiang gave agreement to dangerous decisions much more readily than he would have done in other surroundings. Indeed, so fast did matters move, that within a few months Chiang and Yu Ying, the three young men and the other young woman were all parties to a plot for the assassination of the city Governor.

That this same Governor was a tyrant could not be denied. Chiang did not know why he should not be; but he could not but accept his companions' view that this was wrong and must be altered.

Only one great leader, Chiang learnt, was sufficiently enlightened to be fit to rule the city. This was Chief Minister Yun. Chiang was a little puzzled to hear this. He had understood that

Chief Minister Yun was a man of marked rapacity. Chiang must have been misinformed, or doubtless Chief Minister Yun had changed his ways.

The young people were so positive on these views that it was of little use to demur. Once the Governor was dead a new era of good would begin.

After this was pledged, Chiang wondered a little sadly just how the decision had been arrived at; but it would have been humiliating as the elder personage to have to ask such a question at that point. Moreover, Yu Ying was looking at him across the room with pride and promise in her eyes.

It was decided that lots should be cast to decree which of them should kill the Governor.

It was Chiang Ta Fu who drew the short length of straw. The others all protested at this unhappy chance; and begged Chiang to consider himself excused should his fortitude be insufficient for such a test as this. Only Yu Ying said nothing; but looked at Chiang with worship in her eyes.

He, stiff with dignity, stood up straight and took his leave. He would call again early the following morning to discuss what method of assassination would be most effective. He bowed politely to them all in turn, to Yu Ying last of all; and left them.

On his way home he bumped into one citizen after another, apologizing profusely each time. In his distress he had not remembered to take off his spectacles.

The plan, when Chiang, the following morning, took counsel of his formidable comrades, proved to be an immediate as well as a simple one. On that day, as everyone knew, the Governor must lead the procession of citizens to the Temple of Beneficent Rain. There he would perform the ceremony of The Parting of the Waters by which the vast scheme of water supply that ensured the fertility of the plain would be adjusted in accordance with ancient custom to provide the autumn irrigations.

The procession would pass down the street called Western Gate Street, and here the crowd would press thickest. Chiang must wait here in the forefront of the press of people and leap upon the Governor (like a tiger, as his mentors urged him) and slay him. The three young men gave him a short sword of especial sharpness which he concealed beneath his gown. This extreme haste upset him; and he would have liked to inquire of them what action he should take when he had accomplished his task; but there did not seem to be a suitable moment to put this question. Yu Ying embraced him passionlessly; and Chiang found himself outside in the passageway.

The sun was already high. He hurried off unsteadily towards Western Gate Street, desperately clutching the sword beneath his gown.

It was a motive of extreme delicacy which prompted Chiang to put on his spectacles. It occurred to him that it might be of comfort to the Governor in his moment of dying to be aware that he was not being dispatched by some ignorant fellow of no attainments. It did occur to him also that the less his eyes perceived of the carnage he was about to inflict the more likely it would be that he would have the hardihood to persist in it.

The procession approached. The crowd chattered and swayed with excitement. Exactly as the Governor's litter passed in front of him Chiang sprang out upon the roadway.

His dubious shriek, the uncertain manner of his approach, and the entirely unusual method of brandishing his sword affected the litter bearers more keenly than a more orthodox approach would have done. They dropped the litter upon the roadway and fled as if Oxhead and Horseface had sought them. The stout soldiers who marched beside the litter fell back in astonishment before Chiang's half-blind advance.

Chiang sensed rather than saw the tumbled figure at his feet; and with nervous haste began to hack industriously with his sword.

None hindered him. Behind him the crowd pressed and roared approval. Beside him men of military aspect began to lend their aid. It was not needed. Chiang had chopped and sliced so manfully that there was no life left in the body at his feet.

Alas for the bold plans of the conspirators! The dead man was no Governor, or only very lately so. It was the Chief Minister Yun who, actuated by the purest political motives, had that very morning seized the person of the Governor and had himself assumed that office. By how many years was the onset of progress delayed by this unhappy mischance?

Fortunately Chiang had no time in which to dwell upon such regrets. Even while he fumbled to remove his spectacles in order to discern what was happening, he found himself being embraced by a person of extreme corpulence who, to Chiang's keen discomfort, wore a heavy, wooden collar fastened about his neck. It was the true Governor himself. He had been dragged behind his captor, Chief Minister Yun, who had intended to make the ceremony of The Parting of the Waters more propitious by the embellishment of a human sacrifice.

It can be imagined that, repugnant as it should have been to a

personage like the Governor to be hugging in the open street a stranger of little distinction, yet it was infinitely preferable to being pushed by long poles over the edge of a towering cliff into the raging torrent below.

And so, when the Governor had clasped Chiang warmly for a short time, he began, even while he called loudly to those who now attended him to remove his collar, to seek in his mind for some suitable reward for his deliverer.

It is to be supposed that an appointment to some post of profit passed through his head; and if it did, the much-hacked remains of Chief Minister Yun, lying there before him, would doubtless at once indicate at least one vacant office.

So it was Chief Minister that Chiang Ta Fu became.

In such an eminent position a man need not want for pleasure. It might have been thought that, blessed with power and affluence, Chiang Ta Fu would have renewed in bolder measure his enjoyments touching the pretty, wanton Yu Ying. But such indulgence would have been unfitting to a personage of rank and authority.

In the grave world of state affairs it has ever been held to be imprudent to admit persons of doubtful loyalty to the confidences of one's couch. And Chiang was quick to apprehend that only at one's personal peril does one mix adventurous embraces with dangerous thoughts. Moreover his concubines, though expensive, were apt and eager to please.

Chiang was well content. He had no wish to be led again into the necessity of hacking and slicing persons to death—unless, of course, his wife forced such a retribution upon him.

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SOLUTIONS to SHARP PRACTICE

on page 34

1. *Somerset Maugham; Josephine Tey; Leo Fall; James Joyce.*
2. *Part of the constellation of Orion; the poisoned shirt that killed Hercules; a town in Alberta, Canada.*
3. *Person representing a minor in a legal case.*
4. *i. fossil; ii. Greek military officer; iii. breed of dog; iv. marsupial.*
5. *Originally, to prevent their tarry pigtails staining their clothes.*
6. *Parliamentary rule of procedure; sailor's knot; small rodent found in North America and China.*
7. *The bomb release.*

ONE OF THE FAMILY

" I suppose you grudge me a little kitten," Cathie said bitterly

BY MARY TURNER

WHEN Denis McEwan married Cathie, his mind was in retreat from the heat, and the bloody sand, and the everlasting weariness. She was pale and remote in her nurse's uniform; she made him think of ice, wintry sunlight, silence, and sleep, and he believed he would never want to think about any other things as long as he lived. If only she had stayed remote; but he had had her in his hair ever since.

He had woken early this morning. The twin bed was just that little bit too small for him, and Cathie always tucked in the sheets and blankets unyieldingly, the way she had learnt in hospital.

Downstairs in the kitchen he made tea, with the sensation that he was frying sausages in a cathedral; and, poor hopeless optimist that he was, carried a cup upstairs on the chance that Cathie might like it and be pleased.

" Whatever's this?" Her hair was bristling with great, forbidding steel curlers.

" I made us a cup of tea."

" We never have morning tea. I can't think what's got into you. I hope you haven't used this morning's milk."

He sat down on the edge of his bed while she continued to say all the disagreeable things that ran constantly through her mind.

" I can tell the water wasn't boiling properly. Now you've slopped some in your saucer; be careful it doesn't drip on the sheets. Or on your pyjamas. I expect I shall get one of my headaches, being disturbed early like this. It would be on the day I was going to turn out the sitting-room . . . What do you mean, need I? I suppose you want me to leave the place looking filthy?"

" I sometimes wish you would," he said, knowing that he was committing blasphemy against all the horrid little ornaments, dusted daily, the cold gleaming linoleum, the shiny unwelcoming loose covers, the unblemished cushions, all those sterile household gods to which she martyred herself and him.

She stopped talking to stare at him. Her eyes were large and blue. He remembered that once, long ago, there had been a time when they didn't seem to him as if they were made of highly-glazed blue china.

"Your dandruff's bad again," she said, and began to dress herself modestly under cover of her pink winceyette nightgown.

It wasn't until he was waiting to catch his train home from work that evening that despair suddenly opened in front of him like a pit brim-full of nothingness. All the hot lusty years that marked for him only the way to middle age; the beastly home where you couldn't ever put down a newspaper without creating untidiness; the little garden concreted over because Cathie wasn't going to have mud in the house; the cold rooms empty of children because Cathie said she wasn't going to go through all *that*, not after some of the things she'd seen when she was a nurse, and he could have kids if he did the bearing of them himself—it all took hold of him like a set of iron claws running into his heart, and there wasn't a thing he could do but suffer it. He was lucky McEwan, a man with a nice house and a good wife, and he was stuck with them.

She shouted at him to be careful how he came in.

"What's the matter?"

"I've got a kitten, and you'd be just as likely to step on it with your great feet."

"You know I've never liked cats."

"I didn't get it for you. We've mice and I'm tired of it. And goodness knows, I need some company, slaving away by myself here all day without a soul to speak to. I suppose you grudge me a little kitten."

Easing himself out of the scullery, away from her voice, he slipped into the kitchen. It was just as forbiddingly clean as usual, but the stove seemed to be giving out a little more heat, and in front of it was the kitten. It had misty black fur, a round velvety forehead, its eyes were a colour between amber and copper, and there was a snowy white patch on its neck and breast.

Denis stood still. For a moment the kitten crouched, making to pounce on him. Then it ran up him as if he were a tree and sat on his shoulder, purring deafeningly into his ear.

"Hm," remarked Cathie disagreeably. "It won't do that when it knows you better." But there was a tooth out of place in the saw-edge of her voice, almost as though she doubted whether she was right.

Unless you went to the pub, in the expectation of a row to follow, you went home every day after work. Denis continued to do this as usual; but the unusual thing was that he began

almost to look forward to it, now that the kitten was there. Now, in the joyless atmosphere of the house, there was at least one thing that was bursting with life, nonsense, and prettiness; always exquisitely groomed, sweet-breathed, with nicely modulated voice, and always ready to show by all manner of delicate attentions that it was delighted to see you.

Sometimes it pretended to attack him, coming at him sideways with its tail swollen and its back fur raised; sometimes it walked in front of him with its tail held up like a banner; or again, it hid and made certain that he would know where to find it; always when it was tired of playing, it sat on his shoulder against the bend of his neck, and he would feel the delicate touch of the tiny scratchy tongue on his cheek.

"Disgusting, letting it lick you. It might give you some infection. You never know what they've picked up," Cathie told him.

But he scarcely heard her; and the kitten stared at her and then slitted its eyes up in a very superior way. Apart from accepting its meals, it took no notice of its mistress whatever, although she laboured in vain to engage its attention. "I can't understand it," she repeated a hundred times a day. "It's not as if you liked cats; you would never have had one in the house if it hadn't been for me."

In the office where Denis worked, they woke up and said things. The liftman told the caretaker he reckoned Mr. McEwan had won on the pools and kept it quiet. The blonde typist told the brunette typist that she used to think Mr. McEwan was ever so dull, but now she thought he was ever so romantic.

The brunette typist said she reckoned he'd found himself a girl-friend, and she looked darkly at the blonde typist.

Somebody higher up the ladder left the firm, and Denis got his job. And then, one day, the boss sent for Denis and they talked together for quite some time.

Denis stopped at the pub on his way back that evening; and when he arrived home, smelling slightly of whisky, he allowed Cathie no chance to fire even one shell of all the ammunition she'd been gathering for him. "We're moving," he announced.

"You're drunk! How can we be moving? Why, you don't think I'm going to start househunting after the way I've sacrificed myself for this place—"

"They've made me manager of the Devonshire branch."

"Ho! I suppose you think you're going to accept without consulting me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I won't—"

The kitten came delicately into the room. She was nearly full-grown now. She gave a little chirrup of delight and ran across the floor to Denis, standing up to put her paws on his knee.

"We're *all* going," said Denis quietly. "We can have the last manager's flat over the offices—but as soon as I can, I shall get a little house outside the town."

He sat there, running his hand gently over the kitten's ears, while she stared into his face with eyes like amber lamps. Cathie, wearing a flowered overall, bedroom slippers, and the hair-curlers once more, nattered on but he didn't even see her.

In the sight of his mind, there was loveliness and delight.

The Rector trundled up the sunny lane on his old bicycle, eager to visit his new parishioners, for nobody new came to the village in a million years. He propped the machine against a hedge full of roses, honeysuckle, and bees, and wandered affably through a rickety gate, up a path between wild flower-beds where catmint bloomed in aromatic luxuriance. There was a pram blocking up the front door, empty of its occupant.

The Rector peered round the side of the house, and Denis came to meet him, brown, rotund, and giving off happiness as the honeysuckle gave off its scent.

They shook hands.

"Come and meet my wife," invited Denis.

They walked past a garden shed, with spades and hoes, a barrow, a huge trug of vegetables, and a can of highish liquid manure, all strewn about its approaches. Through the window the Rector could see a room with bowls of flowers, the remains of a hearty meal, and an assortment of disorder.

There was a rug on the lawn. Lying on it in an attitude of disjointed comfort, was a young woman. The Rector was elderly and happily married, and had thought to have forgotten the dreams he'd had when he was young; now he remembered them as sharply as when they were new.

Her hair was dark, with smoky lights and her skin was as white as though the sun had never touched it. Her eyes weren't quite golden, nor amber, nor copper—they were like no human eyes the Rector ever remembered. Sprawled in milky bliss against her side was a plump brown baby with nothing much on.

"This is my wife," said Denis, "and this is the Rector, Kitty."

They sat and talked; she had a lovely voice, low and sleepy. Presently, she fetched out tea and a luscious, untidy cake on a meat dish. As she was pouring out, the Rector felt something brush by his legs.

"It's only Cat," said Denis.

"I'll give her some milk," said Kitty. She put a saucer down.

The Rector cleared his throat. "Rather a funny-looking cat," he remarked blandly.

"She *is* rather scruffy. It's that mud-coloured fur."

"And blue eyes," said the Rector. "So odd. Quite uncanny in a cat. I don't know that I should like her about the place."

The cat turned its ill-favoured head and gave him a look of hatred from its peculiar china-blue eyes.

Denis laughed. "Oh, we couldn't get rid of Cat," he said kindly. "She's really one of the family."

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THE MONTH OF ROSES

All folk with eyes and noses
These senses sweet renew:
This is the month of roses:
In half a hundred poses
The flowers make up to you.

Their many-coloured faces
Attract the charmèd eye.
From green and lovely places
They flaunt a thousand graces
To please the passer-by.

Lured by their looks entrancing,
Approach, as you are meant,
Stay not at tender glancing,
But, beauty fresh enhancing,
Breathe in the dream-filled scent.

ALLAN M. LAING

BANE OF HIS LIFE

We all have our Lilies, our Roses, our Daisies, and our Violets, in thought if not in name—in France even a "little cabbage" is a term of affection—but few seek in the hedgerows for epithets of an opposite nature. . . . Gallantry forbids more than one reference to the ladies, but what a solace it would be to a heckled male if just once in a while he could refer to the object of his devotion as "that bit of old Fleabane."

ROBERT GIBBINGS, *Till I End My Song*

In faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

As for me, I distrust the commonplace;
Demand and am receiving marvels, signs,
Miracles wrought in air, acted in space
After imagination's own designs.
The lion and the tiger pace this way
As often as I call; the flight of wings
Surprises empty air, while out of clay
The golden-gourded vine unwatered springs.
I have inhaled impossibility,
And walk at such an angle, all the stars
Have hung their carnival chains of light for me:
There is a streetcar runs from here to Mars.
I shall be seeing you, my darling, there,
Or at the burning bush in Harvard Square.

ADRIENNE CECILE RICH, *Vertigo*

Earmarked

Ali's chief amusement was to tease Dick. To an Arab it was unbelievable that a boy of thirteen should be ignorant of everything concerning sex. They told him that the stallion he rode was a mare in foal and that he must ride her gently. "How do you know she's a mare?" asked Dick.

"By the shape of her ears."

Dick studied the ears of all the horses on the farm. He argued with the French overseer who had not been initiated into the joke, and who assured Dick that he was riding a stallion. "But no, she's a mare—look at her ears!" The Frenchman kept shaking his head and repeating, "Ears? *Mais non, mon petit!*"

CLARE SHERIDAN, *To the Four Winds*

Court Short

Then to the princess stalked the King: " What ho! " he roared,
" What may you lack?
Why do you look, my love, so dull and bored
With all this pack
Of minions? " She answered, while he waved his sword:
" I want a yak."

" A yak! " he cried (each courtier cried " Yak! Yak! "
As at a blow)
" Is that a figure on the zodiac?
Or horse? Or crow? "
The princess sadly said to him: " Alack
I do not know . . ."

So off the vassals went, and well they sought
On every track,
Till by and by in old Tibet they bought
An ancient yak.
Yet when the princess saw it, she said naught
But, " Take it back! "

And what the courtiers thought they did not say
(Save soft and low),
For that is surely far the wisest way
As we all know;
While for the princess? She went back to play!

VIRNA SHEARD, *The Yak*

Highly Coloured

" But is the adventure true? " inquired the porteress.

" Every word of it. It happened in Denmark; and the heroine was thought so beautiful, that she was known by no other name than that of ' the lovely maid.' "

" In Denmark, say you? " mumbled an old nun. " Are not the people all blacks in Denmark? "

" By no means, reverend lady; they are of a delicate pea-green, with flame-coloured hair and whiskers."

" Mother of God! Pea-green? " exclaimed sister Helena. " Oh! 'tis impossible! "

" Impossible! " said the porteress, with a look of contempt and exultation. " Not at all: when I was a young woman, I remember seeing several of them myself."

M. G. LEWIS, *The Monk*

THE SARK LANE MISSION

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

"YOU'RE wanted down at Central," said Gwilliam. "They want to have a little chat with you about your pension."

"My pension?" said Detective Sergeant Petrella. Being nearer twenty than thirty, pensions were not a thing which entered much into his thoughts. "You're sure it's not my holiday? I've been promised a holiday for eighteen months."

"Last time I saw the pensions officer," said Gwilliam, "he said to me, 'Sergeant Gwilliam, it's a dangerous job you're doing.' It was the time I was after that Catford dog-track shower and I said, 'You're right, there, my boy.' 'Do you realize, Sergeant,' he said to me, 'that every year for the past ten years one hundred and ninety policemen have left the force with collapsed arches? And this year we may pass the two hundred mark. We shall have to raise your insurance contributions.'"

Petrella went most of the way down to Westminster by bus. It was a beautiful morning, with spring breaking through all round. Having some time in hand he got off the bus at Piccadilly, walked down St. James's, and cut across the corner of the park.

It was a spring which was overdue. They had had a dismal winter. In the three years he had been in Q Division, up at Highside, he could not remember anything like it. The devil seemed to have got among the pleasant people of North London. First, an outbreak of really nasty hooliganism; led, as he suspected, by two boys of good family; but he hadn't been able to

pin it on them. Then the silly business of the schoolgirl shoplifting gang. Then the far-from-silly, the dangerous and tragic matter of Cora Gwynne.

Gwynne was the oldest by several years of the Highside detectives, having come to them from the Palestine police. He was a quiet but well-liked man, and he had one daughter, Cora, who was seventeen. Six months before, Cora had gone. She had not disappeared; she had departed, leaving a note behind her saying that she wanted to live her own life. "Whatever that means," Gwynne had said to Haxtell.

"Let her run," Haxtell had replied. "She'll come back."

He was right. She came back at the end of the fifth month, in time to die. She was full of cocaine, and pregnant.

Petrella shook his head angrily as he thought about it. He stopped to look at the crocuses which were thick in the grass. A starved-looking sparrow was trying to bolt a piece of bread almost as large as itself. A pigeon sailed smoothly down and removed it. Petrella walked on, up the steps into King Charles Street, across Whitehall, and under the arch into New Scotland Yard.

He was directed to the office that dealt with pensions, allotted a wooden chair, and told to wait. At eleven o'clock a messenger brought in a filing tray with six cups of tea on it, and disappeared through a swing door in the partition. Since the tray was empty when he returned, Petrella deduced that there must be at least six people devoting attention to the pensions of the Metropolitan

Police and he hoped that one of them would soon find time to devote some attention to him.

He became aware that the messenger had halted opposite him.

"You Sergeant Pirelli?" he said.

"That's right," said Petrella. He had long ago given up correcting people about it.

"C.I.D., Q Division?"

"Ten out of ten."

"Whassat?"

"I said you're quite right."

"I'll tell 'em you're here," said the messenger.

Five minutes later a cheerful-looking girl arrived and said, "Sergeant Petrella? Would you come with me, please?"

His opinion of the Pensions Section became a good deal more favourable. Any department that employed a girl with legs like that must have some good in it.

So engrossed was he in this speculation that it did not, at first, occur to him to ask where they were going. When they reached, and pushed through, a certain swing door on the first floor, he stopped her.

"You've got it wrong," he said. "This is where the top brass works. If we don't look out we shall be busting in on the Assistant Commissioner."

"That's right," said the girl. She knocked on one of the doors on the south side of the corridor; opened it without waiting for an answer; said, "I have Sergeant Petrella here for you," and stood aside.

He advanced dazedly into the room. He had been there once before, and he knew that the grey-haired man behind the desk was Assistant Commissioner Romer, of the C.I.D.; a man who, unlike some of his predecessors, had not come to his office through the soft byways of the legal department, but had risen from the bottom-most rung of the ladder, making enemies at every step, until finally he had found himself at the top; when, there being no one left to fight, he had proved himself a departmental head of exceptional ability.

In a chair beside the window he noted Superintendent Costorphine, who specialized in all matters connected with narcotics. He had worked for him on two previous occasions and had admired him, although he could not love him.

Romer said, in a very friendly voice, "Sit down, will you, Sergeant. This is going to take some time. You know Costorphine, don't you? I'm sorry about this cloak-and-dagger stuff, but you'll understand better when I explain what it's about, and what we're going to ask you to do. And when I say 'ask' I mean

just that. Nothing at all that's said this morning is anything approaching an order. It's a suggestion. If you turn it down, no one's going to think any the worse of you. In fact, Costorphine and myself will be the only people who will even know about it."

Assuming a cheerfulness which he was far from feeling, Petrella said, "You tell me what you want me to do, sir, then I can tell you if I want to run away."

Romer nodded at Costorphine, who said in his schoolmasterly voice, "Almost a year ago, we noted a new source of entry of cocaine into this country. Small packets of it were taken from distributors *inside* the country. It was never found in large quantities, and we never found how it got in.

"Analysis showed it to be Egyptian in origin. It also showed quite appreciable deposits of copper. It is obviously not there as the result of any part of the process of manufacture, and it is reasonable to suppose that it came there during some stage in shipment or entry.

"Once the source had been identified, we analysed every sample we laid hands on, and it became clear—" Costorphine paused fractionally, not for effect, he was a man who had no use for effects, but because he wished to get certain figures clear in his own head—"that rather over half of the total intake of illicit cocaine coming into this country was coming under this head. And that the supply was increasing."

"And along with it," said Romer, "were increasing, at a rate of geometrical progression, most of the unpleasant elements of criminal activity with which we have to deal. Particularly among juveniles. I've had some figures from America which made my hair stand on end. We're not quite as bad as them yet, but we're learning."

Petrella could have said, "There's no need to tell me. I knew Cora Gwynne when she was a nice, friendly schoolgirl of fourteen, and I saw her just before she died." But he kept quiet.

Romer went on, "I suppose if youth thinks it may be blown to smithereens inside five or ten years by some impersonal force pressing a button, it's predisposed to experiment. I don't know. Anyway, you'll understand why we thought it worth bringing down a busy Detective Sergeant from Q Division and wasting his morning for him.

"Now, I'm going to give you some facts. We'll start, as our investigators started about nine months ago, with a gentleman called Batson. Mr. Batson is on the board of the Consort Line, a company which owns and runs three small cargo steamers: the *Albert Consort*, the *William Consort*, and the *Edward Consort:*

steamers which run between various Mediterranean ports, Bordeaux, and London."

When Romer said, " Bordeaux," Petrella looked up at Costorphine, who nodded.

" Bordeaux, but not the racket you're thinking of," he said. " We've checked that."

" Batson," went on Romer, " is not only on the board of the Consort Line. It has been suggested that he *is* the board. But one thing about him is quite certain. Whatever his connection with this matter he, personally, takes no active part. He neither carries the stuff nor has any direct contact with the distributors. But I think that, at the end of the day, the profit goes to him.

" That being so, we looked carefully at his friends, and the one who caught our eye was Captain Cree. Ex-captain now, since he has retired from the services of the Consort Line, and lives in considerable affluence in a house at Greenwich. He maintains a financial interest in the *Consorts* through his friend, Mr. Batson, and acts as chandler and shore agent for them—finds them crews and cargoes, and buys their stores.

" All of which might add up, in cash, to a nice house at Greenwich, but wouldn't really account for—" Romer ticked them off on his fingers—" two personal motor cars, with a chauffeur body-servant to look after the same, a diesel-engined tender called *Clarissa* and based on Wapping, with a whole-time crew of three and, in addition to all these, a large number of charitable and philanthropic enterprises, chiefly among seamen and boys in the dockside area."

" He sounds perfectly terrible," said Petrella.

" Such a statement, made outside these four walls," said Romer, " would involve you in very heavy damages for defamation. Captain Cree is a respectable, and a respected, citizen. One of his fondest interests is the Sark Lane Mission."

" The Sark Lane—"

" The name is familiar to you? It should be. The Mission was one of the first in Dockland, and it was founded by your old school."

" Of course. I remember now. We used to have a voluntary subscription of five shillings taken off us on the first day of every term. I don't think anyone took any further interest in it."

" I should imagine that one of the troubles of the Sark Lane Mission is that people have not taken enough interest in it. The Missioner for the last twenty-five years has been a Mr. Jacobson. A very good man, in his way and, in his early years, energetic and successful. Jacobson finally retired last month, at the age of seventy-five.

"I should imagine that for the last ten years his appearances at the Mission have been perfunctory. The place has really been kept going by an old, ex-naval man called Batchelor—and by the regular munificence of Captain Cree."

"I see," said Petrella. He felt that there must be something more to it than that.

"The appointment of the Missioner lies with the School Governors, but they act on the recommendation of the Bishop of London. Sometimes the post is filled by a clergyman. Sometimes not. On this occasion, the recommended candidate was the Reverend Freebone."

"Philip Freebone!"

"The present incumbent of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Highside. You know him, I believe?"

"Very well indeed. He started up at Highside as curate, and when the incumbent died he was left in charge. I can't imagine anyone who would do the job better."

"I can," said Romer.

When he had got over the shock, Petrella did not pretend not to understand him.

"I don't think I could get away with it, sir," he said. "Not for any length of time. There'd be a hundred things I'd do wrong."

"I'm not suggesting that you should pose as a clergyman. You could go as Mr. Freebone. You've had some experience with youth clubs, I believe."

"For a few months before I joined the police, yes. I wasn't very successful."

"It may have been the wrong sort of club. I have a feeling you're going to be very successful in this one."

"Has Freebone been told?"

"He knows that he's got the job. He hasn't been told of the intended—er—rearrangement."

"I think you may have some difficulty there. Phil's one of the most obstinate people I know."

"I will have a word with his Bishop."

"I am afraid clergymen do not always do what their Bishops tell them these days," remarked Costorphine.

"This isn't a job on which we can afford to make a second mistake," continued Romer.

Petrella looked up.

"We got a man into the Consort Line about six months ago. It took some doing but we managed it in the end, without, as far as we know, arousing any suspicions. He was engaged as an ordinary seaman, under the name of Mills. He made voyages on all three of the ships, and gave us very full but absolutely negative

reports. He was on his way home a fortnight ago in the *Albert Consort*, and was reported as having deserted ship at Marseilles."

"And hasn't been seen since?"

"He's been seen," said Romer. "The French police found him in the foothills behind Marseilles two days ago. What was left of him. He'd been tortured before he was killed."

"I see," said Petrella.

"I'm telling you this so that, if you go in at all, you go in with your eyes wide open. This is an international crowd, who are calculating their profits in millions. And who must be responsible, directly and indirectly, for hundreds of deaths a year. A single life is not of great importance."

"No," said Petrella. "I can quite see that . . ."

A fortnight later the new Missioner came to the Sark Lane Mission. This was a rambling, two-storey, yellow brick building in the style associated, through the East End, with temperance and good works.

The street doors opened into a small lobby, in which a notice said, in startling black letters, WIPE YOUR FEET. Someone had crossed out FEET in pencil and hopefully substituted a different part of the body. On the left of the lobby was a reception office, which was empty.

Beyond, you went straight into the main Mission room; which rose the full two-storey height of the building and looked like a drill hall half-heartedly decorated for a dance. Dispirited red and white streamers hung from the iron cross-bars which spanned the roof. A poster on the far wall bore the message, in cotton wool letters, "How will you spend Eternity?"

At the far end of the hall three boys were throwing darts into a board. Superficially they all looked alike, with their white town faces, their thick dark hair, and their general air of having been alive a lot longer than anyone else.

When, later, Mr. Freebone got to know them, he realized that there were differences. The smallest and fattest was a lazy but competent boy called Ben. The next in height and age was Colin, a dull boy of fifteen, who came to life only on the football field; but for football he had a remarkable talent, a talent which was already attracting the scouts from the big clubs, and was one day to put his name in the headlines. The oldest and tallest of the boys was called Humphrey, and he had a long, solemn face with a nose which started straight and turned to the right at the last moment, and a mouth like a crocodile's. It was not difficult to see that he was the leader of the three.

None of them took the slightest notice of Mr. Freebone,

as he padded across the scarred plank flooring to watch them.

In the end he said, " You're making an awful mess of that, aren't you? " He addressed this remark to the fat boy. " If you want fifteen and end on a double it's a waste of time going for one."

The boy gaped at him. Mr. Freebone took the darts from him, and threw them. First a single three; then, at the second attempt, a double six.

" There you are, Ben," said the tall boy. " I told you to go for three." He transferred his gaze to Mr. Freebone. " You want Batchy? " he said.

" Batchy? " said Mr. Freebone. " Now who, or what, would that be? "

" Batchy's Batchelor."

This was even more difficult, but in the end he made it out. " You mean the caretaker. Is his name Batchelor? "

" 'Sright. You want him, you'll find him in his room." He jerked his head towards the door at the far end of the building.

" Making himself a nice cupper," said Ben. " I once counted up how many cuppers Batchy drinks in a day. Guess how many? Seventeen."

" I'll be having a word with him soon, I expect," said Mr. Freebone. " Just for the moment I'm more interested in you. I'd better introduce myself. My name's Freebone. I'm the new Missioner."

" What's happened to old Jake? " said Ben. " I thought we hadden seen him round for a bit. He dead? "

" Now that's not nice, Ben," said the tall boy. " You don't say, ' Is he dead? ' Not when you're talking to a clergyman. You say, ' Has he gone before? ' "

" Clergyman or not," said Mr. Freebone, " I shouldn't use a ghastly expression like that. If I meant dead, I'd say deád. And Mr. Jacobson's not dead, anyway. He's retired. And I've got his job. Now I've told you all about me, let's hear about you. First, what are your names? "

The boys regarded him warily. The man-to-man approach was not new to them. In their brief lives they had already met plenty of hearty young men who had expressed a desire to lead them onwards and upwards to better things.

In the end it was Humphrey who spoke. " I'm Humphrey," he said. " The thin one's Colin. The fat one's Ben. You like to partner Ben we'll play 301 up, double in, double out, for a bob a side."

" Middle for diddle," said Mr. Freebone.

At the end of the third game, at which point Mr. Freebone

and Ben were each richer by three shillings, Humphrey announced without rancour that he was skinned and would have to go home and get some more money. The others decided to pack it up, too.

"I hope we'll see you here this evening," said the new Missioner genially, and went in search of the resident caretaker, Batchelor, whom he found, as predicted, brewing tea in his den at the back of the hall.

He greeted the new Missioner amiably enough.

"You got lodgings?" he said. "Mr. Jacobson lived up at Greenwich, and came down every day. Most days, that is."

"I'm going to do better than that," said Mr. Freebone. "I'm going to live here."

"*Live* here?"

"Why not? I'm told there are two rooms up there."

"Well, there *are* two rooms at the back. Gotter nice view of the factory. It's a long time since anyone lived in 'em."

"Here's someone going to start," said Mr. Freebone.

"There's a piler junk in 'em."

"If you'll lend me a hand, we'll move all the junk into one of the rooms for a start. I've got a camp bed with my luggage."

Batchelor gaped at him.

"You going to sleep here *tonight?*" he said.

"I'm going to sleep here tonight and every night," said Mr. Freebone happily. "I'm going to sleep here and eat here and live here, just as long as they'll have me."

The next week was a busy one.

As soon as Batchelor saw that the new Missioner was set in his intention and immovable in his madness, he made the best of it, and turned to and lent a hand.

Mr. Freebone scrubbed, and Batchelor scrubbed. Windows were opened which had not been opened in living memory. Paint and distemper arrived by the gallon.

Almost everyone fancies himself as a decorator, and as soon as the boys grasped that an ambitious programme of interior decoration was on foot, they threw themselves into it with zeal. One purchased a pot of yellow paint, and painted, before he could be stopped, the entire outside of the porch.

Another borrowed a machine from his employer without his employer's knowledge, and buffed up the planks of the main room so hard there was soon very little floor left. Another fell off the roof and broke his leg.

Thus was inaugurated Mr. Freebone's Mission at Sark Lane; a Mission which, in retrospect, grew into one of the oral traditions

of the East End, until almost anything would be believed if it was prefaced with the words, " When ol' Freebone was at Sark Lane."

It was not, as his charges were quick to remark, that he was a particularly pious man; although the East End is one of the few places where saintliness is estimated at its true worth. Nor that he interested himself, as other excellent Missioners had done, in the home life and commercial prospects of the boys in his care. It was simply that he lived in, with, and for the Mission. That, and a certain light-hearted ingenuity, allied to a curious thoroughness in the carrying out of his wilder plans.

The story will some day be told more fully of his Easter Scout Camp; a camp joined, on the first night, by three strange boys whose names had certainly not been on the original roll, and who turned out to be runaways from a Borstal Institution—to whose comforts they hastily returned after experiencing, for a night and a day, the vigorous hospitality of the Sark Lane Scout Troop.

Nor would anyone who took part in it lightly forget the Great Scavenger Hunt which culminated in the simultaneous arrival at the Mission of a well-known receiver of stolen goods and the Flying Squad; or the Summer Endurance Test in the course of which a group of contestants set out to swim the Thames in full clothes, and ended up in a debutante's Steamer Party. In which connection Humphrey claimed to be one of the few people who has danced, dripping wet, with a Royal personage.

Captain Cree turned up about a month after Mr. Freebone's arrival. The first intimation that he had a visitor was a hearty burst of bass laughter from the club room. Poking his head round the door he saw a big, heavy figure, the upper half encased in a double-breasted blue jacket with brass buttons, the lower half in chalk-striped flannel trousers. The face that slewed round as he approached had been tanned by the weather to a deep russet, and then transformed to a deeper red by some more cultivated alchemy.

" Mussen shock the parson," said Captain Cree genially. " Just showing the boys some pictures the Captain of the *William* picked up at Port Said on his last trip. You're Freebone, arn-chew? I'm pleased to meet you."

He pushed out a big red hand, grasped Mr. Freebone's, and shook it heartily.

" I've heard a lot about you," said Mr. Freebone.

" Nothing to my credit, I bet," said Captain Cree, with a wink at the boys.

" I know that you're a very generous donor to the Mission,"

said Mr. Freebone, "and you're very welcome to come and go here as you like."

Captain Cree looked surprised. It had perhaps not occurred to him that he needed anyone's permission to come and go as he liked. He said, "Well, I call that handsome. I got a bit of stuff for you outside. The *William* picked it up for me in Alex. I've got it outside in the station wagon. You two nip out, and give my monkeys a hail, and we'll get it stowed."

Humphrey and Ben departed, and returned escorting two sailors, dressed in blue jerseys, with the word *Clarissa* in red stitching straggling across the front.

"Dump 'em in there, David," said Captain Cree to the young black-haired sailor. "There's a half gross of plimsolls, some running vests, a couple of footballs, and two pairs of foils. You put them down, Humphrey. I'm giving 'em to the Mission, not to you. Where'd you like 'em stowed?"

"In the back room, for the moment, I think," said Mr. Freebone. "Hey—Batchelor."

"Old Batchy still alive?" said Captain Cree. "I thought he'd have drunk himself to death long ago. How are you, Batchy?"

"Fine, Captain Cree, fine, thank you," said the old man, executing a sketchy naval salute.

"If you've finished stewing up tea for yourself, you might give a hand to get these things under hatches. You leave 'em out here a moment longer, they'll be gone. I know these boys."

When the Captain had departed, Mr. Freebone had a word with Humphrey and Ben who were now his first and second lieutenants in most club activities.

"He's given us a crate of stuff," said Humphrey.

"Crates and crates," agreed Ben. "Footballs, jerseys, dart boards. Once he brought us a couple of what's-its—those bamboo things—you know, with steel tips. You throw 'em."

"Javelins?"

"That's right. *They* didn't last long. Old Jake took 'em away after Colin threw one at young Arthur Whaley."

"Who were the sailors?"

"The big one, he's Ron Blanden. He used to be a boy round here. The other one's David," Ben explained. "He'd be off one of the ships. Old Cree gets boys for his ships from round here, and when they've done a trip or two, maybe he gives 'em a job on the *Clarissa*. That's his own boat."

"I see," said Mr. Freebone.

"He offered to take me on, soon as I'm old enough," said Humphrey.

"Are you going to say yes?"

Humphrey's long face creased into a grin. "Not me," he said. "I'm keeping my feet dry. Besides, he's a crook."

"He's a what?"

"A crook."

"He can't just be *a* crook," said Mr. Freebone patiently. "He must be some sort of crook. What does he do?"

"I dunno," said Humphrey. "But it sticks out he's a crook, or he wouldn't have so much money. Eh, Ben?"

Ben agreed that this was correct. He usually agreed with Humphrey.

Later that night Mr. Freebone and Batchelor sorted out the new gifts. The foils were really nice pairs, complete with masks and gauntlets. Mr. Freebone, who was himself something of a swordsman, took them up to his own room to examine them at leisure. The gym shoes were a good brand, with thick rubber soles. They should be very useful. Boys, in those parts, wore gym shoes almost all day.

"We usually wash out the vests and things," said Batchelor. "You know what foreigners are like."

Mr. Freebone approved the precaution. He said he knew what foreigners were like. Batchelor said he would wash them through next time he had a boil-up in his copper.

A fortnight later—that was, in the last week of May—the officer on the monitored telephone in the basement at New Scotland Yard received a call. The call came at six o'clock in the evening, precisely, and the caller announced himself as Magnus.

The officer said, "Count five slowly, please. Then start talking." He put out his hand and pressed down the switch. The tape recorder whirred softly as the man at the other end spoke. Later that evening Romer came down to the Yard and listened to the play-back. The voice came, thin and resonant, but clear.

"Magnus here. This is my first report. I've settled into my new job. I feel little real doubt that what we suspect is correct but it's difficult to see just how the trick is pulled.

"The *Clarissa* meets all incoming *Consorts*. She takes out miscellaneous stores, and usually fetches back a load of gear for the Mission. It must be the best equipped outfit in London. The customs experts give the stuff the magic eye treatment before it's put on *Clarissa*, and I've managed to look through most of it myself. Once it's in the Mission it's handed straight over to the boys, so it's a bit difficult to see how it could be used as a hiding-place.

"Cocaine's not bulky, I know, but I gather the quantities

we're looking for are quite considerable. I have a feeling this line in sports goods might be a big red herring. Something to take our eye off the real job.

"Carter, the mate of *Clarissa*, is, I think, an ex-convict. His real name is Coster, and he's been down a number of times for larceny and aggravated assault. He carries a gun. Nothing known about the crew.

"Captain Cree—" here the tape gave a rasping scratch—"Sorry. That was me clearing my throat. As I was saying, Captain Cree's a smart operator. I should think he makes a good bit on the side out of his chandlering, but not nearly enough to account for the style he lives in. You'd imagine a man like him would keep a little woman tucked away somewhere, wouldn't you? But I never heard any whisper about the fair sex. A pity. We might get a woman to talk. That's all for now."

The weather was hot and dry that summer, and through July and August increasing supplies of illicit cocaine continued to dribble into London as water through a rotten sluice gate; and the casualty figures and the crime graphs climbed, hand in hand with the mercury in the thermometer. Superintendent Costorphine's face grew so long and so bleak that Romer took to avoiding him. For all the comfort he could give him was that things would probably get worse before they got better.

At Sark Lane Mr. Freebone was working an eighteen-hour day. Added to his other preoccupations was an outbreak of skin disease. The boys could not be prevented from bathing in the filthy reaches and inlets of the Thames below Tower Bridge.

When he could spare a minute from his routine work he seemed to cultivate the company of the crew of the *Clarissa*. Carter was surly and unapproachable, but the boys were pleasant enough. Ron Blanden was a burly, fair-haired young man of twenty. He had ideas beyond the river, and talked of leaving *Clarissa* and joining the Merchant Navy.

David, the young black-haired one, seemed to be a natural idler, with few ideas beyond taking life easy, picking up as much money as he could, and dressing in his smartest clothes on his evenings off. He once told Mr. Freebone that he came from Scotland, but his eyes and hair suggested something more Mediterranean in origin. There was a theory that he had been in bad trouble once, in his early youth, and was now living it down.

Mr. Freebone had no difficulty, in time, in extracting the whole of the candid Ron Blanden's life story, but David, though friendly, kept his distance. All he would say—and this was a matter of record—was that he had made one trip on the *Albert*

Consort that April, and had then been offered a job by Captain Cree which he had accepted.

"I don't like that David," said Batchelor one evening.

"Oh, why?" said Mr. Freebone.

"He's a bad sort of boy," said Batchelor. "I've caught him snooping round this place once or twice lately. Fiddling round with the sports kit. I soon sent him packing."

"Hm," said Mr. Freebone. He changed the subject somewhat abruptly. "By the way, Batchelor, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. How much do we pay you?"

"Four pounds a week, and keep."

"And what does Captain Cree add to that?"

The old man stirred in his chair, and blinked. "Who said he added anything?"

"I heard it."

"He pays me a pound or two, now and then. Nothing regular. I do jobs for him. Anything wrong with that?"

Magnus had fallen into the routine of reporting at the appointed hour on every second Wednesday. Towards the end of September his message was brief, and contained a request. "Could you check up on the old boy who acts as caretaker at the Mission? He calls himself Batchelor and claims to be ex-R.N. I don't believe that's his real name and I don't believe he was ever in the Navy. Let me know through the usual channels and urgently."

Costorphine said to Romer, "Something's brewing down there. My contacts all tell me the same story. The suppliers are expecting a big autumn run."

Romer made a small, helpless gesture. "And are we going to be able to stop it?" he asked.

"We can always hope," said Costorphine. "I'll find out about that man Batchelor. Jacobson will know something about him. He took him on, I believe . . ."

It was a week later that Humphrey said to Mr. Freebone, apropos of nothing that had gone before, "He's a character, that David, all right."

"What's he up to now?" said Mr. Freebone, between gasps, for he was busy blowing up a batch of new footballs.

"Wanted to cut me in on a snide racket."

Mr. Freebone stopped what he was doing, put the football down, and said, "Come on. Let's have it."

"David told me he can get hold of plenty of fivers. Good-looking jobs, he said. The *Clarissa* picks 'em up from the Dutch and German boats. He had some story they were a lot the Gestapo had printed during the war. Is that right?"

"I believe they did," said Mr. Freebone. "But they'd be the old white sort."

"That's right. That's why he wanted help passing 'em. If he turned up with a lot of 'em, it'd look suspicious. But if some of us boys helped him—"

In a rage, Mr. Freebone sought out Captain Cree, who listened to him with surprising patience.

"Half those lads are crooks," he said, when the Missioner had finished. "You can't stop it."

"I'm not going to have your crew corrupting my boys," said Mr. Freebone. "And I look to you to help me stop it."

"What do you want me to do? Sack David?"

Mr. Freebone said, "I don't know that that'd do a lot of good. But he's not to come near the Mission."

"I'll sort him out," said the Captain. He added, "You know, what you want's a holiday. You've had a basinful of us since you came, and you haven't had a day off in six months that I can see."

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Freebone, "I was thinking of taking a long weekend soon."

"You do that," said the Captain. "Tell me when you're going, and I'll keep an eye on the place for you myself."

He sounded almost paternal . . .

"This is report number thirteen," said the tape-recorded voice of Magnus. "I hope that doesn't make it unlucky. I had a narrow escape the other day, but managed to ride the Captain off. I'm bound to say that, in my view, things are coming to a head. Just how it's going to break I don't know, but some sort of job is being planned for next weekend. Cree and Carter have been thick as thieves about it.

"Talking about thieves, I was glad to hear that my hunch about Batchelor was correct, and that he had been inside. There's something about an old lag that never washes off. It was interesting, too, that he worked at one time in a chemist's shop, and had done a bit of dispensing in his youth. All he dispenses openly now are cups of vile tea. That's all for now. I hope to be on the air again in a fortnight's time with some real news for you."

Costorphine said, "That ties in with what I'd heard. A big consignment, quite soon."

"We'd better put the cover plan into operation," said Romer.

"You've got two police boats on call. Whistle them up now."

"A police launch would be a bit out-gunned by *Clarissa*. I've arranged a tie-up with the Navy. There's a launch standing by at Greenwich. We can have her up when we want her. Only we can't keep her hanging about for long—she's too conspicuous."

"I've got an uneasy feeling about this," said Romer. "They're not fools, the people we're dealing with. They wouldn't walk into anything obvious."

"Do you think Petrella—?"

"You've got to admit he's been lucky," said Romer. "It was luck that the job was going, and luck that we managed to get it for him. And he's done very well, too. But luck can't last for ever. It only needs one person to recognize him—one criminal he's ever had to deal with, and he must have had hundreds through his hands in the last few years."

"He'll be all right," said Costorphine. "He's a smart lad."

"I'm superstitious," said Romer. "I don't mean about things like black cats and ladders. I mean about making bargains with fortune. You remember when we were talking about this thing in here, way back in March, I said something about a single life not being important. It might be true; but I wish I hadn't said it, all the same."

Costorphine confided to his wife that night, "It's the first time I've ever seen the old man jumpy. Things must be bad. Perhaps the politicians are after him."

That Saturday night there were about two dozen boys in the club room of the Mission; and it says a lot for the enthusiasm engendered by Mr. Freebone that there was anyone there at all, for if ever there was a night for fireside and television this was it. The wind had started to get up with the dusk, and was now blowing in great angry gusts, driving the rain in front of it.

At half past four Captain Cree, faithful to his promise, had come up to keep an eye on things in the Missioner's absence. There had been nothing much for him to do, and he had departed for the dock where *Clarissa* lay. Now, through the dark and the rain, he drove his big station wagon carefully back, once more, through the empty streets, and manœuvred it into the unlighted cul-de-sac beside the Mission Hall.

Carter, a big, unlovely lump of a man, was sitting beside him, smoking one of an endless chain of cigarettes. This time Captain Cree did not trouble with the front entrance. There was a small side door, which gave on to a dark lobby. Out of the lobby, bare wooden stairs ran up to Mr. Freebone's bedroom; on the far side a door opened through to Batchelor's sanctum.

Captain Cree stood in the dark, empty lobby, his head bent. He was listening. Anyone glimpsing his good-natured red face at that particular moment might have been shocked by the expression on it.

At the end of a full minute he relaxed, went back to the street door, and signalled to Carter. The back of the station wagon

was opened, and the first of four big bales was lifted out and humped indoors. The bolt of the outer door was shot.

Batchelor was waiting for them. Everything about him showed that he, too, knew that some crisis was impending.

"You locked the door?" said Captain Cree. He jerked his head at the door which led into the Mission Hall.

"Of course I locked it," said Batchelor. "We don't want a crowd of boys in here. How many have you got, for Chrissake?"

"Four," said Carter. He was the coolest of the three.

"We'll do 'em all now," said Captain Cree. "It'll take a bit of time, but we won't get a better chance than this. When's *he* coming back?" An upward jerk of his head indicated that he was talking about the occupant of the back attic.

"Sunday midday, he said. Unless he changed his mind."

"He'd better not change it," said Carter.

He helped Batchelor to strip the thick brown-paper wrapping from one of the bales. As the covering came away the contents could be seen to be woollens, half a gross of thick woollen vests. In the second there was half a gross of long pants. Grey socks in the third. Gloves and balaclava helmets and scarves in the fourth.

Carter waddled across to the enormous old-fashioned copper in the corner, and lifted the lid. A fire had been lit under it earlier in the afternoon, and was now glowing red; the copper was full of clean hot water.

What followed would have interested Superintendent Costorphine intensely. He would have realized how it is possible to bring cocaine into the country under the noses of the smartest customs officials; and he would have appreciated just why those samples might contain minute traces of copper.

The three men worked as a team, with the skill born of long practice. Carter dumped the woollens by handfuls in the copper. Captain Cree took them out, and wrung each one carefully into a curious contraption which Batchelor had pulled from a cupboard. Basically this was a funnel, with a drip tray underneath. But between funnel and tray was a fine linen gauze filter. And as the moisture was wrung from each garment, a greyish sediment formed on the filter.

When the filter was so full that it was in danger of becoming clogged the Captain called a halt. From a suitcase he extracted an outsize vacuum flask, and into it, with the greatest possible care, he deposited the grey sediment.

It took them over an hour to go through the first three packages. During this time the water in the copper had itself been emptied and filtered, and the copper refilled. Twice, during this time, a

boy had rattled on the door that led into the hall, and Batchelor had shouted back that he was busy.

"Tip the last lot in," said the Captain, "and be quick about it." They were all three sweating. "We don't want anyone busting in on us now."

He had never handled such a quantity before. The third flask was in use. Two were already full. He had his back to the door leading to the lobby, and they none of them heard or saw it open.

"What on earth are you all up to?" said Mr. Freebone.

The three men swung round in one ugly, savage movement. The plastic cap of the flask fell from Captain Cree's hand and rolled across the floor.

"What is it—washing day?"

There was a silence of paralysis as he walked across the room, and peered down into the flask. "And what's this stuff?"

"What—where have you come from?" said Captain Cree hoarsely.

"I've been up in my room, writing," said Mr. Freebone. "I changed my mind, and came back. Do I have to ask your permission?" He extended one finger, touched the grey powder in the flask, and carried his finger to his lips.

Then Carter hit him. It was a savage blow, delivered from behind, with a leather-covered sap, a blow which Mr. Freebone neither saw nor heard.

They stared at him.

"You killed him?" said Batchelor.

"Don't be a damned fool," said Carter. He looked at Captain Cree. The same thought was in both their minds.

"We shall want some cord," he said. "Have you got any?"

"I don't know—"

"Go on. Get it."

It took five minutes to truss up Mr. Freebone. He was showing no signs of life, even while they manhandled him out and dumped him in the back of the station wagon.

Captain Cree seemed to have recovered his composure.

"You stay here and watch him," he said to Carter.

"Are we going to gag him?"

"I think that would be a mistake," said the Captain. "Leave too many traces." They looked at each other again. The thought was as clear now as if it had been spoken. "If he opens his mouth, hit him again."

Carter nodded, and the Captain disappeared into the building. In half an hour the job was finished, and he came out carrying a suitcase.

" Not a blink," said Carter.

The Captain placed the suitcase carefully in the back of the car, where it rested on the crumpled body of Mr. Freebone. Then he climbed into the driving seat, backed the car out, and started on the half-mile drive to Pagett's Wharf, where *Clarissa* lay.

The wind, risen almost to gale force, was flogging the empty streets with its lash, part rain, part hail, as the big car nosed its way slowly across the cobbles of the wharf.

Captain Cree turned off the lights and climbed out, followed by Carter. Twenty yards away, in the howling wilderness of darkness, a single riding light showed where *Clarissa* bumped at her moorings. At their feet the river slid past, cold and black.

The Captain said into Carter's ear, " We'll take the cords off him first. I put 'em on over his clothes so they won't have left much mark. If he's found, what's to show he didn't slip, and knock his head going in? "

" *If* he's found," said Carter . . .

Back at the Mission, Batchelor was facing a mutiny.

" What've you been up to, locked in here all evening? " said Humphrey. " That was the Captain's car in the alley, wasn't it? "

" That's right," said Ben.

" And what've you done with Mr. Freebone? "

" He ent here," said Batchelor. " And you can get out of my room too, all of you."

" Where is he? "

" He went away for the weekend. He'll be back tomorrow."

As soon as he had said this, Batchelor realized his mistake.

" Don't be soft," said Humphrey. " He came back after tea. We saw him. Pop upstairs, Ben, and see if he's in his room."

" You've got no right—" said Batchelor. But they were past taking any notice of what he said.

" And what were you doing with all those clothes? " He pointed at the sodden pile in the corner. " Is this washing night, or something? "

Batchelor was saved answering by the reappearance of Ben. " He's been there," he said. " The light's on. And there's a letter on the table he was finishing writing. *And* his raincoat's there."

" He wouldn't go out without a coat," said Humphrey. " Not on a night like this. He's been took."

Here Batchelor made his second mistake. He broke for the door. Several pairs of hands caught him, and threw him back

ungently into the chair. For the moment, after the scuffle, there was silence and stillness.

Then Humphrey said, "I guess they were up to something. And I guess Mr. Freebone came back when he wasn't expected. And I guess the Captain and Carter and that lot have picked him up."

"So that's all you can do, guess," said Batchelor viciously. But the fear in his voice could be felt.

"All right," said Humphrey calmly. "Maybe I'm wrong. You tell us." Batchelor stared at him. Humphrey said, "Is that water hot, Ben?"

Ben dipped the tip of his finger in, and took it out again quickly.

Humphrey said, "Either you talk, or we hold you head-down in that."

It took six of them to get him halfway across the floor. Batchelor stopped cursing and started to scream. When his nose was six inches away from the water he talked.

"Pagett's Wharf," said Humphrey. "All right. We'll lock him up in here. If he's lying to us, we'll come back and finish him off afterwards."

"How do we get there?" said one of the boys.

"Night like this," said Humphrey, "the quickest way to get anywhere's to run."

The pack streamed out into the howling darkness.

In the big foredeck cabin of the *Clarissa*, Captain Cree was giving some final instructions to Carter when he heard the shout. Carter jumped across to the cabin door and pulled it open.

"Who's out there?" said the Captain.

"Ron's on deck," said Carter. "David's ashore somewhere."

"Who was that shouted?"

"It sounded like Ron," said Carter.

This was as far as he got. The next moment a wave of boys seemed to rise out of the darkness. Carter had time to shout before something hit him, and he went down.

The attack passed into the cabin. Captain Cree got his hand to a gun, but had no time to fire it. Humphrey, swinging an iron bar which he had picked up on deck, broke Cree's arm with a vicious side swipe. The gun dropped from his fingers. "Pull him in," said Humphrey. "Both of them."

Captain Cree, his right arm swinging loosely in front of him, his red face mottled with white, held himself up with his sound hand on the table.

Carter lay on the floor at his feet, and Ben kicked him, as hard and as thoughtlessly as you might kick a football. The boys had tasted violence and victory that night, and it had made them drunker than any strong drink.

"There's one thing can keep you alive," said Humphrey. "And that's Mr. Freebone. Where is he?"

For a count of ten there was silence. The Captain's mouth worked, but no sound came out of it.

Almost gently Humphrey said, "So you dropped him in the river. He's going to have three for company. Right?"

That was right. That was the way things were done in the land of violence and hot blood. Humphrey swung his iron bar delicately.

"You can't," said the Captain. "You can't do it. I'll tell you everything. I'll do what you like. There's ten thousand pounds' worth of cocaine in that suitcase. It's yours, for the taking."

"We'll pour it in after you," said Humphrey. "It'll be useful where you're going."

"You can't do it—"

"Who's stopping us?"

"I am," said a voice from behind them. The third member of *Clarissa*'s crew, David, stepped through the door into the cabin.

He was drenched with rain, dishevelled, and out of breath from running; but there was something about him which held all their eyes.

"How—"

"It'll save a lot of time and trouble," said David, "if I tell you that I'm a police officer. My name, not that it matters, is Petrella. I'm a Sergeant in the plain-clothes branch, and I'm taking these three men into custody."

"But," said Humphrey, "they've killed Mr. Freebone."

"They meant to kill him," said Petrella. "No doubt of it. But there've been two police launches lying off this wharf ever since dusk, and one of them picked him up. He's at Leman Street Police Station, and from what he's told me, we've got more than enough to send both these men away for life. So don't let's spoil a good thing now."

There was a bump at the side of the boat as the River Police tender hitched on alongside. The first man into the cabin was Superintendent Costorphine, looking like a bedraggled crow. He pounced on the suitcase.

"Three months' supply for London," said Petrella. "It'll need a bit more drying-out, but it's all there . . ."

Later, Petrella found Philip Freebone propped up on pillows in St. George's Hospital, where he had been taken, under protest, and deposited for the night.

"There's nothing wrong with me," he said. "I'd just as soon be back in my bed at the Mission. There's a lot to do. I shall have to find a replacement for Batchelor."

"Are you going on with that job?"

Freebone looked surprised. "Of course I am," he said. "I've enjoyed it. I knew I should. That's why I wouldn't let you do it."

"The trouble is," said Petrella, "that you've set yourself too high a standard. The boys will never have another night like tonight as long as they live. Do you realize that if I hadn't turned up, they really were going to knock Captain Cree off and put him and Carter over the side?"

"Yes, I expect they would." Freebone thought about it, and added, "It's rather a compliment, really, isn't it? What are you going to do now, Patrick?"

"Take a holiday," said Detective Sergeant Petrella. "A good long holiday."

© Michael Gilbert 1958

Last night as usual I went to her home,
There sat her old father and mother alone.
I asked for my love and they soon made it known
That she-e had flown away.

She packed up her box and eloped in the night,
To go-o with him at his ease.
He lowered her down from a four-storey flight,
By means of his flying trapeze.

Author Unknown

Police Protection

A new and alarming thought had struck him [Maluovo]. His daughter! Had the thieves molested her? He turned the handle of her door but it would not open. He hammered on it, panic-stricken. " Giulia! Are you all right? "

" Yes," she replied faintly. To have said anything else would have been a reflection on Cesaro, encircled as she was by his arms.

" Open the door, then," her father demanded.

" I can't. It's locked," she shouted back, adding in a whisper, " Cesaro, you must get out of here somehow, anyhow. He will kill you, he gets into such terrible rages. Ah, that is an idea! Why did we not think of it before? "

Cesaro, collecting his scattered wits at mention of the notary's homicidal tendencies, had pulled the sheets from the bed and was feverishly knotting them together. With Giulia's assistance he tied one end to the leg of the dressing-table, planted a last passionate kiss on her lips, and began a perilous hand-over-hand descent. The din in the passage rose to a crescendo. Giulia, seeing her lover safely on the ground, cast discretion to the

winds and followed him despite his frantic head shakings. When she had managed half the distance one of the sheets began to tear, but fortunately did no more than gently let her down the rest of the way. Cesaro caught her and began to remonstrate fondly, and at that moment Rosario opened the front door.

It was a pretty tableau which met his eyes. The dangling sheet, the embracing couple, and the nearby suitcase all combined to paint a picture which even his obtuse mind could hardly fail to recognize. A slow grin spread over his face. Cesaro was quick to see it. "Rosario," he pleaded. "You see how it is. You were young yourself once. Will you help us?"

The policeman nodded vigorously . . . "What can I do?" Rosario wheezed.

"Stop him from following us somehow." And without further ado Cesaro grabbed the suitcase with one hand and his betrothed with the other, and hurried away.

FRANK HEADLAND, *The Mayor of Roccabianca*

There was a young person of Mullion
Intent upon marrying bullion;
By some horrible fluke, she jilted a duke
And had to elope with a scullion.

SANDYS WASON

Kind Hearts and Coronets

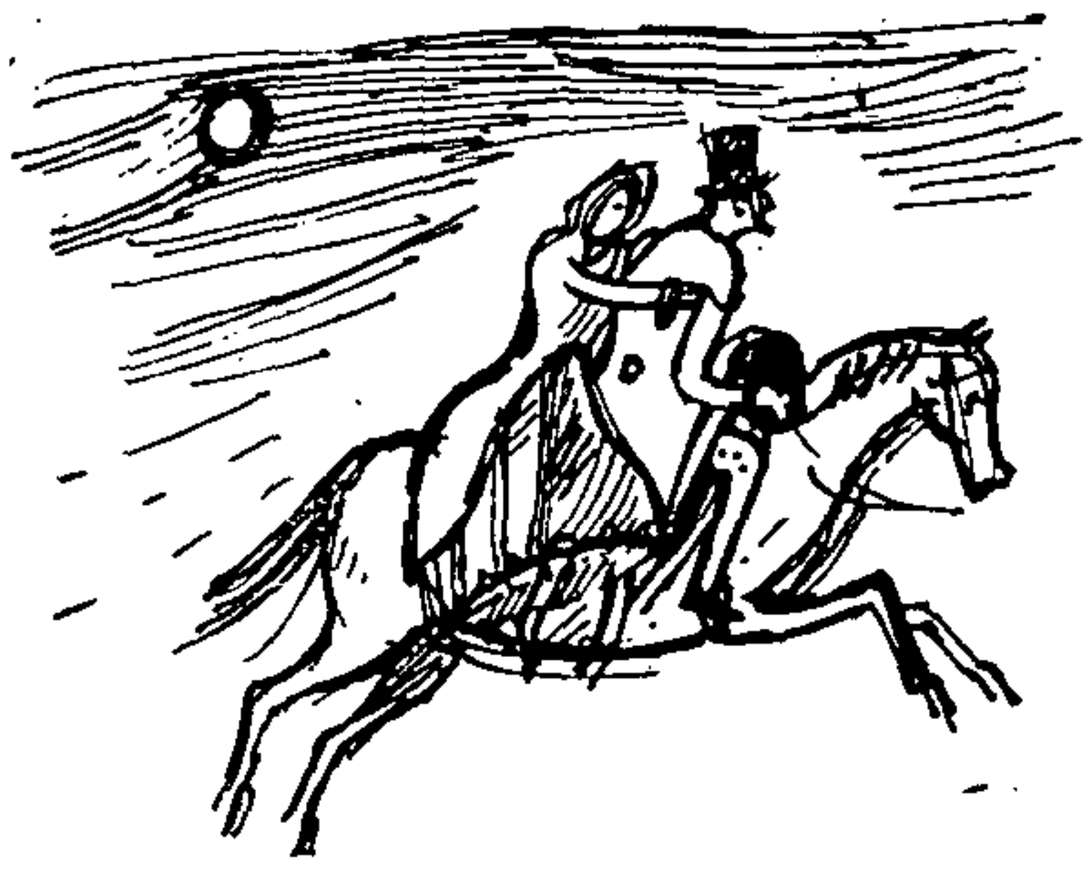
The first Marquess of Abercorn ordained that the housemaids should wear white gloves when they made his bed. He had three wives in succession, and when he heard that one of them was contemplating an elopement, he placed the family coach at her disposal, remarking that it was beneath the dignity of a Marchioness to elope in a hired carriage.

ALLAN M. LAING, *Laughter and Applause*

Going Concern

You, that are going to be married, think things can never be done too fast; but we, that are old, and know what we are about, must elope methodically, madam.

OLIVER GOLDSMITH



Drawing a Veil

The wedding was conducted—not inappropriately in Lily's case—in French.

It took place in the morning, which made getting out of the house a problem, especially since Lily was wearing a white embroidered muslin frock which to an observant mother might seem slightly strange on a brisk October day. Nevertheless, Lily managed to kiss her father and mother without exciting undue suspicion (neither even noticed the white rose and the sprig of geranium in her hair), and to slip through the front door. Matilda had gone on ahead, carrying the bridal veil and white gloves wrapped up in a handkerchief. At the corner Lily shook out the veil and put on the gloves. At St. John's Park they were met by Mr. Mowatt and his two groomsmen, and the party proceeded on its way.

ERIC WOLLENCOTT BARNES, *Anna Cora: the Life and Theatre of Anna Cora Mowatt*

Just Impediment

The kirk was deck'd at morning-tide,
The tapers glimmer'd fair;
The priest and bridegroom wait the bride,
And dame and knight are there:
They sought her baith by bower and ha';
The ladie was not seen!
She's o'er the Border, and awa'
Wi' Jock of Hazeldean.

SIR WALTER SCOTT, *Jock of Hazeldean*

One Word in Her Ear

"Elope?" she cried delighted all of a sudden.

"Elope," he agreed grave.

She gave him a big kiss. "Why Charley," she said, seemingly more and more delighted, "that's romantic."

"It's what we're going to do whatever the name you give it," he replied.

"But don't you see that's a wonderful thing to do," she went on.

"Maybe so," he said soft into her ear, "but it's what we're doing."

"Oh I can love you for this," she murmured.

HENRY GREEN, *Loving*

ACTING MECHANIC

A pair of oily blue slacks
was sticking out from under the lorry

BY OWEN GRAY

THE picture pinned over the cash register at the back of the bar had begun to curl at the edges, but it hadn't curled so much that you couldn't recognize her. She was wistful and appealing, but a little imp of mischief was in her eyes, as if at any moment she might come dancing off the page. The man went on looking at the picture because there wasn't anything else in the bar that was half so easy to look at.

"That's Terry Darke." The grizzled bartender, who looked as if he should have left pin-ups behind fifty years before, stopped swabbing down the bar to tell him. The man knew it was Terry Darke, of course, and so did everyone else in Australia. The publicity boys had been giving her the full treatment—photos at the film festivals, contracts with astronomical figures in them, photos of her at her glamorous premières, in the foyer with her husband.

"Born right here in Mungadatta," the veteran behind the bar went on. "Used to work in her father's garage up the road a way, where they're fixing your car—that used to be old Darke's workshop till he went east a few months ago."

The visitor shuffled uneasily, like a horse scenting a camel. He was hot and tired and totally disinclined to believe, or even to listen. He mumbled something about going to see if his car was ready yet, but the shimmering heat of the afternoon checked him.

Outside he could see the main street of Mungadatta, dusty, deserted, a tiny blemish on the edge of the vast Nullarbor Desert. When they converted the Transcontinental to diesel they took away Mungadatta's coal dump, and now the little place was just waiting for the last of the population to leave so that it could become a ghost town like its neighbours. It was off the main road, but the garage got some of the pickings from the Nullarbor. Then there was Madigan's wool shed a mile away down by the railway, and a general store, and a hotel, and a few old people doing nothing. That was Mungadatta.

"Don't believe me, young fellow, do you?" the bartender

went on, quite without rancour. He took a deep pull at his beer.

"It's true, though. She used to work there, and she was as good a mechanic as the old man himself. Many a time I've seen her under a truck, with grease all over her. And all the time she swore she'd be a famous actress one day. She used to read Shakespeare to the abos, and study the lives of stage people, and bully her father to send her to Sydney to get some training."

He laughed, and went on to tell me about her . . .

Old Darke stood firm on that, all right. He kept telling her that the big smoke was no safe place for a lonely girl, and she'd have to wait till she was older.

And then, about six years ago, the Department of Mines sent a team out this way and they discovered pitchblende at Humber Junction, twenty miles from here. It turned out to be too small a strike to work, but at the time everyone was uranium-happy and prospectors came rushing with their Geiger-counters from all over Australia. There were all kinds of them, university kids, city slickers, old-time gold prospectors, swaggies—we had them sleeping on the floor, eight to a room. It was hot that year, remember, and before long they had sorted themselves into those who knew what they were looking for and those who spent their money in here getting plastered and talking big.

The day that Kyle Finucane swung into Mungadatta I was up at Darke's garage collecting a drum of paraffin. He was a young chap, good-looking in an Irish sort of way, and he was singing with the radio in his jeep as he pulled in at the pumps.

It was about a hundred and seven in the shade, and soon he got tired of waiting in the sun and walked over to the workshop to look for some service. All he could see there was a pair of oily blue slacks sticking out from under the big breakdown lorry, and he gave these a bit of a nudge with his toe. A moment later a twelve-inch wrench came out from underneath and rapped him. Terry came out after it in time to see Kyle dancing about holding his ankle.

It was love at first sight—you could see that from the way they started in at each other.

"You thought I was a doormat, maybe?" Terry inquired. She was sitting on the floor, balancing the wrench in her hand.

"Sure and I thought everyone was dead around here," Kyle retorted.

"Well, watch where you put your big feet if you want to reach old age," Terry went on, pushing her hair back with her sleeve and leaving a smudge on her forehead. "Some of you city gazobs are too darned free with your manners."

Kyle tested his ankle gingerly on the ground.

"It works," he said. "I thought you'd broken it."

Terry swung the wrench reflectively. "Maybe we could try again, now that I've had the practice—" she began.

"All I want is a bit of service," Kyle broke in plaintively. "Perhaps if you'd call your boss—"

"I think I can supply any service you may require," she replied haughtily, getting to her feet.

Kyle looked at her, eyebrows raised in mock surprise, and she coloured slightly.

"Would you, darlin'?" he asked.

They kept it up, off and on, for a week, sparring at each other like a pair of fighting cocks warming up. Kyle got floor room to spread his bedroll here at the hotel, and he made one or two excursions with his jeep and his Geiger-counter, but it was easy to see that his mind wasn't on uranium. He kept dropping in at Darke's garage for odd little jobs to be done, and pretty soon he was just dropping in for nothing in particular.

There's not much in the way of evening entertainment for young people here in Mungadatta, but one sight that they never get tired of is the Transcontinental. You can see her coming for twenty miles across the flat, and she hits nearly a hundred miles an hour as she goes through. Well, when Kyle took Terry down there three nights running and each time they didn't get back until a couple of hours after the Transcontinental had gone, people started talking. One swaggie, not knowing the score, joked about it to Big Jim Madigan, and Madigan, who wasn't the best at seeing a joke against himself, laid him flat on his back with a dislocated jaw.

Madigan was the agent for one of the big wool brokers, and that made him the most important man in Mungadatta. He'd had his eye on Terry for some time, but although Terry was flattered she was as cool to him as to all the other men who made a play for her. She had plenty of opportunity to be cool, because any number of the big lorries used to make a little detour off the main road just to fill up at Darke's and exchange a few words with his daughter. But Terry could handle them. Old Darke always used to say she was biding her time, and we all knew that when the time came he was sure it would be Madigan.

One evening, about a week after he arrived, Kyle came into the bar looking as if a rich aunt had cut him out of her will.

"That Darke," he said, as he settled down with his beer. "He's got as much faith in human nature as a vulture that's been robbed of the last corpse."

Now Darke is a friendly old stick and a cobber of mine, and I might have had something to say about that, but I could see that the boy was in a muck sweat so I let him have his head.

"He starts asking me about my prospects," Kyle went on indignantly. "I don't mind that, even if it is a bit old-fashioned. I told him I had the quickest business brain in East Sydney, and that's better than money in the bank."

"Did he agree with you?" I asked.

"He did not. He more or less told me I was a useless layabout like a lot of the other prospectors, expecting to find uranium under every rock. Me, who's only trying to spend my holiday more profitably than lying on Bondi Beach."

He stood there, looking moodily into his glass. "Who's Madigan?" he asked suddenly.

I told him. "Madigan's not the man to say much," I finished up. "But he's used to getting his own way in Mungadatta."

Kyle drank up his beer. "Not this time," he said quietly.

The bar was filling up, and I couldn't stay talking to him.

"Better go and find that uranium," I said. "That'll fix Darke and Madigan, too."

That's the worst of trying to cheer someone up, you never know when they'll take you seriously. Kyle was up before dawn the next day, heading out of town, his jeep loaded to the roof with food and water. And he went north. Humber Junction is down south, and all the prospecting had been done round there. Going north there's no water, no tracks, nothing. It's one of the worst areas in Australia.

It was five days before we saw him again. Five days is a long time for anyone but an experienced bushman to live out there, and in normal times a trooper would probably have gone out for him with a black tracker. But there was only one trooper in the district, covering several townships; and with all the strangers coming and going he had his hands full. Here in Mungadatta the prospectors' money was beginning to run short, and their tempers shorter, and few evenings passed without some trouble somewhere.

The only person who worried about Kyle at all was Terry. The last couple of days she was haunting the hotel here, trying to pick up some news, and her eyes were all red with crying. She was waiting here when Kyle finally got back on the evening of the fifth day.

He didn't look too good—his face was red and peeling like a piece of cheap leather, but he nodded to her as cheerfully as if he had just gone down the street to buy a pound of tea, and I could see her blinking back her tears and clenching her hands

just to stop herself from punching him on the nose in front of everybody.

The men streamed out of the bar and surrounded the jeep, but he pushed through them to where Terry was standing alone. Madigan was in the bar that night, but he didn't go out. He just watched through the window. Kyle walked up to Terry and kissed her on the lips, just quickly, and she wasn't expecting it, and she coloured as the crowd wolf-whistled and cheered.

"So you decided to come back," she said coolly. "We thought maybe you'd gone east again."

"I'm ready to leave when you are," he answered, and she smiled and then frowned as all the men laughed. All except Madigan.

Later on, Kyle came in for a wash and a shave. Then he ordered steak and eggs, and while he was waiting I told him he was lucky to get back at all.

"Lucky?" he answered. "You can say that again."

"Did you do any good?" I asked him, not seriously.

"I found some pitchblende, if that's what you mean. Not much, but some."

I looked at him hard, but he wasn't joking.

"Far out?"

"I—I don't know." He paused, and then he turned to me. "Look, I found traces of pitchblende in a valley—quite a high-class oxide. But I was lost. That desert—have you ever been out there? It's like crawling across the surface of the moon. You can see the whole horizon, without a break—not a tree, nothing. I've never been scared—really scared—like that before."

He was all tensed up, and then he laughed. "I hadn't much idea of where I was," he continued. "And then, the third night out, I trod on my compass and after that I had no idea at all. I headed roughly south by the sun, hoping to find the railway. The jeep got stuck in soft sand and I walked for nine hours. Before I started walking I drank the water out of the radiator, all hot and rusty, and it tasted beautiful."

"But you came back in your jeep?"

"Yes. I found the railway, and ran into a maintenance gang. Two of them drove me back and pulled the jeep out, and gave me water and petrol."

He sighed, and turned to his steak and eggs. "That desert is death," he said with a shiver. "I wouldn't go back there, not for a whole mountain of uranium. So far as I'm concerned, anyone who gets it deserves to be rich. From now on you can put me down as just a city boy."

"You'll be going back to Sydney now?" I ventured.
He looked up at me. "Not just yet," he said.

Now I'm not much of a talker, but somehow the buzz of Kyle's strike went through Mungadatta like a bushfire in a gale. The more Kyle said he had found only traces, the more they thought he was playing cagey. Rumour piled on rumour and the prospectors, despondent and edgy after weeks of disappointment, rushed at each garbled report like starving dogs after bones. It was what they wanted to believe, and they fastened eagerly on every new exaggeration that spread among them.

By next evening Mungadatta was practically empty. The ones who still had money and equipment were away first, heading north into the yawning desert. The ones who hadn't any money borrowed, and the ones who couldn't borrow got credit at the general store. Not that Bags Mailey and his wife were eager to give credit to a ratbag bunch like this, but they hadn't any choice. Excitement was running high that afternoon.

Uranium fever is very catching, and by the evening there were some surprising absentees among the locals as well. Old Darke himself went out. He wasn't looking for uranium—he took the big breakdown lorry with its six-wheel drive and spent the next few days pulling other people's trucks out of loose sand. But the best organized expedition of all was Madigan's. He closed up the wool store and took three men with him in his new jeep with a trailer full of gear.

By nightfall they were all streaming out over the desert, by car and by truck, on horses and on foot. Later, we could see their camp-fires and cooking-stoves glittering, scattered over miles of the deadliest country in the world.

It gets cold and creepy out there when the sun goes down, and one night of it was enough for some of them. Early in the morning they started drifting back. And when they found that Kyle hadn't left the hotel, some of them began to growl that he had been fooling them. But Kyle never changed his tune.

"Don't I keep telling you," he said, "I found some pitchblende—not much, but a little. And it can stay there. I wouldn't go back, not if it was snowing uranium."

With old Darke out of the way Kyle was able to spend most of his time round at the garage, and every evening he and Terry would go down together to watch the Transcontinental go through. And when he wasn't with Terry he would stand at the bar here and talk to me about her.

"How could a girl like that happen in a place like Mungadatta?" he used to ask, and then he'd go all starry-eyed. "She's

going to marry me, I think—I hope. Just waiting till her Dad gets used to the idea—she's too sweet a girl to upset him."

At other times he'd start in about what she was going to do to Sydney when she got there. "I've worked with them, and I know," he raved one night. "Every producer in town will be grovelling at her feet. Hollywood will be begging for her."

As the week went by more of the prospectors came trickling in, first the soft ones, then the tougher ones: mostly they were angry and looking for someone to blame.

It was a week before they were all back. Madigan and his crew came in late on the sixth day. It wasn't very long before someone told Madigan that Kyle had been seeing a lot of Terry, and he stormed in here as black as thunder. He still had a week's growth of scruffy beard, and his eyes were red from dust and sun. Kyle was drinking quietly in a corner, but Madigan ignored him. It was late, and there weren't many people—just a couple of his mates and two or three swaggies. Madigan started talking, and his voice was loud.

"Whose fault was this?" he demanded, pounding on the bar. "Who sent us mullocking into the desert with his talk of a big strike? You all know who it was, don't you?" He paused to wipe his mouth with his sleeve, and his audience growled. It only wanted something like this to bring things to a head.

"You know who it was, but do you know why?" There was a gritty edge to Madigan's voice now. "I'll tell you why. He got us all out of town because he wanted a free hand with a girl that had caught his eye. He wanted her father out of town, and all of us. That's why we were tricked into going out there, to lose our gear, to live or die as best we could."

"You're a liar!" Kyle took three paces towards Madigan, and slung a glassful of cold beer straight in his face. Then he put the empty glass on the bar quite deliberately, drew Madigan's guard down with a quick jab towards his paunch, and smacked him hard across the face with the back of his hand.

Madigan rocked back against the wall, his eyes narrowed to glittering pin-points. Then he hunched his thick shoulders and shambled forward, flat-footed. His two mates grabbed Kyle by the arms, and Madigan gripped the front of Kyle's shirt in one big hand and slowly drew back a fist like a club.

If Madigan had let fly, he would have knocked Kyle right out. But he didn't. He stood poised for a moment, the beer dripping off his chin, while Kyle struggled in the grip of two men. Perhaps Madigan realized that to beat up Kyle, who was half his weight, would do him no good with Terry.

"No," he said very softly, and there was a look on his face as

if he had been talking it over with Satan himself. "No, not like that." He slowly lowered his hands. "I think this is a matter for everybody."

Madigan looked thoughtfully round the men in the bar. "We'll have a meeting here tomorrow afternoon. Meanwhile—" he turned back to Kyle—"in the absence of Trooper Shawn, I will take the responsibility of having this man locked up." A twisted grin touched his mouth. "For his own safety."

There's a bit of a lock-up at the back of Mailey's store. The trooper uses it when he has to, but as he isn't always here Mailey keeps a spare key for emergencies. They hustled Kyle over there, three or four of them, lifting him off his feet when he didn't walk fast enough. They dumped him down inside the lock-up, and slammed the barred door, cutting Kyle off in mid sentence as he was telling them how many different ways he was going to sue them. Madigan took the key, and Mungadatta settled down for an uneasy night.

The next afternoon was the noisiest this hotel has ever known. Even the roughest of the swaggies had a bit of money to spend—Madigan had advanced them something on work they were going to do at the wool store, or so they said. The grog was flowing, and before long there'd been three fights and a broken window.

Madigan, like the cunning dingo he was, didn't turn up. He had sown the seeds. He was furious because, due to Kyle, he had made a fool of himself over the strike. He wanted Kyle run out of town or worse because he was burning with jealousy. He just saw that everyone had money for liquor, and left the rest to nature. Madigan's two men were in the bar giving things a prod. Anyone could see there was trouble coming. I tried to get a phone call to Trooper Shawn, but I couldn't find him and I didn't dare leave the bar for too long—they would have been helping themselves as soon as they noticed I wasn't there.

Things came to a head about five o'clock. Some of them, who hadn't been able to afford a decent drink for weeks, were as full as boots and spoiling for a lynching. They all spilt out into the street and started for Mailey's store like a pack of wolves, howling for Kyle.

They were halfway there when they met Terry, and the sight of her sobered them like a cold shower. She was running, and she was as pale as death. Her blue boiler suit was torn from shoulder to waist, and there was a smear of blood on her face.

"They've got him," she cried. "Madigan's taken him. They're going to hang him from the wool store gantry!" The mob checked, and she turned from one to the other, and you could see the bruise marks round her eye. "Help me," she

pleaded, and the tears were running down her cheeks. "They'll kill him. Help me!"

They stopped short, like sheep stampeded into a fence. There's nothing that shifts a man so quickly as the tears of a pretty girl, and I think half of them were on her side straight away. The other half were furious with Madigan for having beaten them to it. And they all wanted to be in at the kill.

An angry murmur came from a score of throats as they turned and headed for the wool store down by the railway. It wasn't only the prospectors now. The thing had taken a serious turn, and the locals, women and all, joined in.

Madigan's wool store was dark against the evening sky, and as the crowd got closer they could see the silhouette of the gantry and the still shape of a man hanging from it. A sort of eerie moan went up, part fear, part rage, part disappointment. This was murder, and few of them had any stomach for that. Silently they collected in the growing darkness, a knot of white faces looking up at the figure on the rope high above them.

It was hard to tell the exact moment they began to realize that the figure was a dummy. Perhaps it was the old boiler suit which didn't fit, or the theatrical make-up on the face. Perhaps it was Madigan himself, striding round from his house, demanding to be told what the hell was going on. But once they caught on, I have never seen a mood change so quickly.

They marched back to Mungadatta, a silent, angry mob. And the first thing they saw in the middle of the street was Darke's big breakdown lorry. Swinging from the winch on the back was the iron gate of the lock-up, pulled clean out of the wall.

Terry and Kyle had gone, of course, and so had Kyle's jeep.

Madigan, hurled himself into Darke's van, and the others piled into any transport they could see. The street was filled with the grinding of starters turning over motors that wouldn't start. It was ten minutes before they found out that Terry had taken the rotor arm out of the distributor of every car or truck in the place, and another ten minutes before Darke discovered that his stock of spare rotor arms had gone too.

For four days there was no motor transport moving in Mungadatta. Then a parcel came with a Sydney postmark. It was addressed to Darke, and in it were all the rotor arms, and three dozen little pieces of wedding cake. © Owen Gray 1958

★ ★ ★

NUT MUCH IN IT

Willpower—the ability to eat one salted peanut.

★ *Walter Clemons, young Texas-born author, seaman, and book reviewer—a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and graduate of Princeton—makes his first appearance in Argosy with this powerful new story.*

LOGIC OF BLOOD

BY WALTER CLEMONS

IT is a story handed down in a family, I cannot say if it is all true. In 1838, Gerald Mehan retired to the open country some miles north of San Jacinto where the Mexicans had surrendered. Major Mehan had fought in the Revolution, and so had his son, who was named after him. Father and son built a house together, and the younger child, Cecelia, was housewife in place of her dead mother.

How or when the mother died is no part of the story; there is not even a sign of her in her children's faces. In the miniatures of the two Geralds and Cecelia, only the clothes are different: out of three ovals the same pale face stares, the forehead broad, the eyes light in colour and proud. It is a handsome face, though the recurring narrow mouth, unmitigated in three pictures, is troubling. But no doubt the likenesses were hastily completed during a visit to New Orleans, when there was no time for subtle variations of expression.

Major Mehan was a respected lawyer. There is a letter in which Moses Austin speaks well of him; before the Revolution he wrote a pamphlet of grievances against Mexico which was circulated in the southern states to recruit sympathizers to the Texan Cause; and in the first years of the Republic he served a term in its Congress. He was often invited to Galveston or Washington-on-the-Brazos to help impress visitors who turned up in these years when Texas was seeking recognition by European governments. It would have been hard to defend the man who killed Gerald Mehan, if he had been brought to trial.

Once or twice a year Cecelia Mehan went with her father to Galveston, where she made an agreeable impression at musical evenings and dances and returned home having declined invitations to prolong her stay and refused proposals of marriage. At

home, she did the cooking and entertained herself by riding alone in the afternoons in clothes borrowed from her brother.

It cannot have been a lively life, but her ties to her male kin were so strong that at twenty she was totally disinclined to marry; this suited her father and brother well. Whether out of regret for her situation or from an inclination to keep her quietly fixed in it, her father had a spinet carted out to their lonely farm, and sometimes went out with her in the afternoons despite his own distaste for riding.

One raw day in the spring of 1840 the two of them rode farther than usual. It had rained heavily the week before, and pools had collected all over the flat country thereabouts. Now the grey sky opened and released a clear, weak sunlight. The smell of wet earth and new grass made the horses twist and prance on their first outing since the rain; the whole country was full of the shy green violence of the new season breaking out. Father and daughter rode for several hours without a word to each other, profoundly contented; and with nods, no words, they agreed at the same moment to head back.

Still some way from home, Mehan saw a thick, damp smoke rising out of a cottonwood thicket by the creek that crossed his land. It was nearly dark. When they rode closer they saw the flicker of a camp-fire through the trees. Mehan drew up and told Cecelia to wait. He had had some trouble the previous summer from stray Cherokees. He took his rifle from the saddle.

When he reached the fire, he found a rough-looking man with curly black hair and beard, dressed in buckskins, seated against a tree-trunk. The stranger jumped up and pulled a knife from his belt; Mehan, not a violent man, but a cautious one, trained his rifle on him.

The stranger grinned. "What do you want, old man?"

"You're on my land. I wondered why," Mehan said.

"Is that any reason to draw a gun on me? I found a spot to rest, I don't see any house on it."

"You didn't look very hard, maybe. Where'd you come from?" The intruder only smiled unamiably. Mehan said, "I don't care for your manners."

"No more'n I like your gun, dad," said the dark man.

It happened in a moment. A second man, coming quickly through the trees from the creek, lifted an axe and struck Mehan across the back of the neck with a soft crack like a green branch splintering. Mehan's rifle went off and hit the first stranger in the face. The two fell simultaneously—the curly-haired man into the fire, Mehan a few yards away kicking, while the blood rushed from his neck.

The man who was still alive danced in indecision, then rushed to pull his companion out of the fire before turning back to the other convulsing body. Perhaps out of mercy, he picked up the axe and struck again, and when the legs went on kicking he threw the axe away and closed his eyes and vomited into the fire.

He only opened his eyes when the woman screamed a few minutes later. For a moment he supposed he saw a man among the trees while a woman's voice came from somewhere else.

He looked crazily around. Then he ran to the figure in trousers, clapped his palm over her mouth, and pulled her into the firelight. He said, "Who are you?" and at the sound of his own voice he burst out crying.

When he took his hand away from her mouth, she made no sound.

"Who's that?" the young man said. "He tried to kill my brother. Is he your husband?"

Cecilia stared at his beardless face, as young as her own. He had curly black hair above dark eyes and a wide, trembling mouth, weak as a rose.

"Talk to me," the man shouted at her through his tears. When he got no answer, he said, "I didn't mean to do it. I came out and saw him with a gun on my brother, my blood came up, and I— Why won't you say anything?"

A wind rocked the branches above them, sifted tart smoke into their eyes. The man looked round, terrified, at the roused firelight glittering on the tree-trunks. When he turned back to the girl, she was silent as before.

He began to babble: "What will I do? I've always been with my brother. I never even liked him much, I didn't mean to do it. Where will I go now without him?" He sank down on his knees and pressed his wet face to the woman's stomach. She touched his shoulders gently, vaguely.

He pulled her down beside him and searched her face. "Was he your husband? Are you by yourself?" He shook her. "I'll take care of you now. Maybe you didn't want to be with him? We'll take care of each other."

In a frenzy of fear and grief he kissed her on the mouth, and when she didn't fight him, he pushed her backwards on the ground, sobbing from the depths of his body. She lay under him without blinking or crying out.

The man came slowly to his senses on the cold ground and, calmer, looked at the bodies lying a few feet away. The fire was low. He said to her, "We'll have to go away from here."

He decided to hide the dead men; he left the woman lying

where she was and went first to her father. He hadn't meant to look at the head, but just then a branch flared up in the fire and illumed the face, lying on its left cheek, only loosely hinged to the shoulders. Hardly believing what he saw, he made himself go to the fire and draw out the burning branch as a torch. He turned slowly and looked at the grey hair and the half-open eyes dabbed with two specks of reflected fire.

There was no misunderstanding the resemblance. He fell to his knees and howled.

The girl turned her face, without lifting her head from the ground, and gazed at him mutely. He stopped crying and took up his torch again to look at her. She faintly smiled at the fire in his hand, as at some toy.

"You can't talk?" the man whispered, sick at heart, while her blank eyes showed only firelight and he was left to crouch on his heels in solitude and wonder whether she had been insane before or had only been driven so tonight.

He started at a soft, ticking sound. Rain was beginning to fall through the bare trees, stinging in the fire. It increased, and he watched it wetting the girl's face. He found he couldn't touch the dead bodies. Without looking at them again, he pulled her to her feet and led her to where his horse was tied.

Riding slowly through the downpour, he didn't hear another horse approaching until a man's voice, almost at his ear it seemed, called, "Father? I was afraid you were lost," and in his panic he pushed the silent girl to the ground and spurred his horse, grazing the flank of the other as he escaped into the black rain.

When Gerald Mehan carried his sister into their house, thinking she was unconscious, it shocked him mortally to see her eyes were open. He gave her rum and questioned her gently, then turned angry, then perplexed, then frightened. There was no sound but rain, and the fire popping.

At last he undressed her and put her to bed and after riding out again twice that night, calling his father, he fell asleep towards morning in his wet clothes before the fire and woke up at dawn stiff and sick, to go out searching again.

This time he saw three horses near the cottonwood thicket, and he rode there.

A neighbour's wife nursed Cecelia while Gerald rode to town. The news of Major Mehan's murder produced wide astonishment and anger but no information except from a boarding-house keeper in Nacogdoches, who had let two dark young men riding from Louisiana spend a night in his barn: he didn't know their names. It occurred to Gerald in his daze of grief

that the black-bearded face might bring Cecelia's memory back, but she lay in a fever, out of reach and near death. The two dead were buried.

Then one morning Gerald was bent over the fire before daybreak cooking his breakfast. He turned at a noise behind him and saw his sister in the doorway, sallow and thin.

She said, " Here, I'll do that."

Gerald ran to her and embraced her. She said slowly, " Is Father dead? " Her brother nodded.

" I've been sick, haven't I? " she said.

He nodded once more and bent his head. She touched his face, as if tears were a curiosity to her. " Well, I will get your breakfast. I'm not sick any more, though I feel weak."

Gerald tried to make her sit down, but she wouldn't, so he took a seat on the bench by the fire while she wandered unsurely to the cupboard for dishes and served him the pork and cornbread he had been preparing.

The sun rose. Gerald chewed and stared, full of grief and a little frightened of her. Though the weather had turned warm, she had put on a dress of heavy brown wool she had worn weeks before. She ate her breakfast in silence, blinking into the fire.

When she was finished, she walked to the window where the sun was shining in. The branches of a redbud tree she had planted were covered with tight pink beads, and Gerald watched her look down and pluck wonderingly at her wool skirt. He set his empty plate down on the bricks and went to put his arms round her.

Cecelia said, " I've been sick longer than I thought, then." Out in the side yard the hens were parading. Cecelia's black horse was munching the bright green grass, frisking his tail; his back was silvery under the sun.

" My poor sister," Gerald said. He loved her very much, and it seemed to him that if she had died too, he might have been driven out of his mind. " Do you remember anything now? "

" Riding with father, I remember. And then when I was sick I dreamt he was dead, over and over again. He never liked riding. He went to please me. Did he have a fall? "

She grew stronger over the summer. One afternoon she came out of the house and Gerald, repairing a wagon, paused and watched her walking distractedly in the orange sunlight as if she had mislaid something. She went to her horse and hesitantly rubbed his nose and murmured. She turned towards the barn where her saddle was hung, but she stopped, and from twenty yards away Gerald could see her shoulders tremble. She went back into the house, Gerald went on working.

He took her for a long walk one afternoon in August. By this time of year Gerald's cattle were grazing glumly in parched, tan grass. The ground underfoot was hard as rock.

It took nearly half an hour to reach the cottonwoods, and as they approached the thicket they scared up a whirl of blackbirds. Gerald took Cecelia's hand, but she walked into the shade without a sign of fear and sat down to rest on a log while Gerald sank at the foot of the tree where the black-bearded man had lain. The black camp-fire scar was on the ground between them.

"This is where Father died, then," Cecelia said in a hushed voice.

"You begin to remember?"

Cecelia shook her head, ashamed. "I can tell it from your face."

Gerald told what he had found here as gently as he could. "There was another man," he said at the end. "He slipped past me in the dark just before I found you. One day I'll find him and kill him."

Cecelia listened to it all as to a strange old story, and said in a passionless, convinced voice that it was terrible.

There was great celebration in Galveston when Texas was annexed to the United States in 1845. As regular as the volleys of cannon fire and outbursts of oratory, there were sudden explosive meetings of friends who hadn't seen each other since the Revolution, falling into each other's arms in the muddy, crowded streets and then stepping back to introduce their families.

In the evening, fireworks burst in the sky above a carnival mob shoving and fumbling from hotel to bar room to bandstand. The revellers sank into bed hours after midnight, most of the lost children were returned to their parents, and next morning it began again.

By mid week the ecstasy was cooling, and a dark young man stood on a hotel verandah watching the die-hards. In the crowd below, a man with a stern pale face stopped dead and looked up, and the dark one stared back.

Both at the same moment thought they knew each other, and Gerald Mehan started up the steps, then halted, recognizing the reason for his mistake. It had happened to him less often in the past couple of years, to stop and peer at a dark face, thinking he saw a resemblance to the man who had died with his father, and in the midst of this celebration he had been especially unready for any such reminder. He had supposed he saw a comrade from the revolutionary days.

He said to the stranger, half turning away to go back down the

steps, "I beg your pardon, sir. We don't know each other after all, do we?"

The dark man, a few years younger than Gerald, said in a light voice, "No, but I thought the same." He held out his hand. "This is my first visit to Galveston, and I don't know anyone. I'd be honoured if you'd join me for a while."

They introduced themselves and stood for a time on the verandah, their faces burning in the torchlight from a platform across the street. An orator read out the annexation proclamation like the text for a sermon and followed it with a perspiring dilation upon the future.

"My throat is dry from listening to him," said Charles Broussard after a while.

The two men found a saloon where, sitting up late drinking whisky, they opened their hearts in the way that is possible to utter strangers in the privacy of cheers and breaking glass.

Broussard had more to tell for he had, he said, come to New Orleans from a farm north of Biloxi and gone to sea at sixteen. His tales of Liverpool and Marseilles induced in Gerald Mehan a feeling of stifling in his boxed life, as if the wide ranch he had inherited from his father were no more than a cell.

"What foolishness," Broussard said warmly, "when I've come here in the very hope of giving up drifting and finding a place to settle as you've done."

Gerald Mehan had not married. He had spent a lonely five years living with a sister, dull and silent most of the time. Cecelia was not out of her mind, but she had remained numb, her spirit hooded if not killed, and while the sight of her had been an ache to her brother at first, now it was a depressing, guilty irritation, though he treated her with tenderness.

Late in the evening, Gerald began to talk about his trouble, and his new friend listened attentively to the story of the murder and its aftermath. Hesitating, Gerald even confessed to Broussard why his face had seemed familiar.

Broussard said, "The dead man looked as much like me as that?"

Gerald made a quick erasing gesture, for fear he had given offence. "It was five years ago. It's dim to me now."

"Tell me if you think this is cruel," said Broussard. "But if there is this resemblance, would it do good or harm to introduce me to your sister? In the hope that my face might—I don't know—" He looked embarrassed. "No, probably it would be kinder to leave things as they are. But if you are unhappy—"

"The only thing that could make me happy would be to meet the man who killed my father," Gerald said violently. "Nothing

can bring my father back, but to kill his murderer, that would give me some peace, at least. If you could bring my sister out of this—whatever it is, well, that would be something. I'd be obliged to you for life." The two of them, very moved by this, shook hands through the smoke.

No doubt Broussard was a fool, coming back to Texas at all. The night of the killing, he had ridden from the thicket straight to Galveston and signed on a ship sailing next day for Liverpool. At a stop for cargo in New Orleans he had read a brief newspaper account which attributed Major Mehan's murder to bandits. It was true, as he had now told the dead man's son, merely altering five years to ten, that he had stayed at sea. There his life was suspended. His brother had always led him, and Charles found no direction for himself.

For what had happened so suddenly in the thicket he didn't feel guilt, exactly. There was no idea of expiation in the feeling that slowly took hold of him over two or three years' voyages: that whatever he was to do with his life, the roots of it were in the cottonwood thicket, and he must go back there to find his way. He postponed it; he dismissed the thought; it always returned to him. At last, when he heard in New Orleans of the celebration in Texas, he decided the time had come.

The meeting in the street wasn't his first glimpse of Gerald Mehan. A few nights earlier, Mehan had walked into a saloon with two other men, and when they left, a man next to Broussard had nudged him, and retailed the story of the vengeful son and the unmarried sister who kept house for him.

Broussard had no plan, merely a feeling of danger and alertness. He quickened to life as he hadn't in five years. There was no bravado in his speaking to Gerald Mehan on the verandah and asking to meet his sister; it was the action of a man compelled, and unable to do otherwise.

And so the next day Charles Broussard came out of his hotel at noon and with a glance at the American flags fluttering agitatedly against the sky made his way to the house where Gerald Mehan and his sister were staying.

He was shown into a sparely-furnished parlour; Gerald came across the uncarpeted floor, and took his arm. "Cecelia, this is Mr. Charles Broussard. My sister, sir."

Both men were rather tense with misgivings. Their sudden acquaintance, and a notion that had made sense over whisky, hardly stood up under the daylight.

In a dress of pale green silk, Cecelia Mehan was a severe-looking young woman. There was nothing pathetic about her; in fact, her coolness might have passed for self-conceit. She

had become one of those people in whom a lack of life or some numbing blow to growth tends to show outwardly as a superb composure; she had become, also, very beautiful.

The visitor bowed and watched her with soft, alert black eyes. Gerald watched anxiously. But Cecelia greeted Broussard calmly, and an unremarkable conversation about weather, annexation, and the growth of Galveston proceeded smoothly.

In the course of it, Cecelia said to the guest, "My brother didn't tell me whether you are visiting here or have come to settle, Mr. Broussard?"

He said in his soft way, "I don't know myself, Miss Mehan. I want to settle somewhere, perhaps in Texas. I'm tired of travelling. I have no family, you see, and no ties . . ."

His voice died away, as a bright flush disturbed Cecelia's face. Her brother saw it and thought he saw, though he didn't know his guest well enough to be sure, Broussard's face whiten. A moment passed. Cecelia Mehan said in her perfectly normal voice, which was rather toneless, "My brother can help you there. He knows most of the land around here."

She turned to Gerald. "You must tell Mr. Broussard how to come and visit us."

"Certainly," Gerald said, surprised by her suddenness. Charles Broussard bowed politely.

With Gerald's help, Charles bought land a few miles from the Mehan place, and during the first year the two men were good friends. Broussard was welcome in the silent household of brother and sister.

Some evenings Cecelia went to the spinet after supper and Broussard sang in a light uncertain tenor that only his animated manner made acceptable as music at all. When he wandered very far off pitch, Cecelia would stop and strike one note several times while he fought to tune himself. Then, "Useless. I am a crow," Broussard said. "You play in what key you please, and I'll sing as near it as I can."

Gerald sat by the fireplace, rather left out, but glad enough to hear his sister laugh. Yet though the two men were friends, Gerald's response was one of immediate black opposition when Charles came to him in the summer of 1846 and said he wanted to marry his sister. Gerald was too embarrassed by his own anger to say anything at all for a few minutes. Finally he shook Broussard's hand stiffly, and said he would speak to Cecelia.

Cecelia had suddenly taken up riding again that spring. When she came home to prepare her brother's supper she found him staring into the empty fireplace. He told her in a neutral voice of Broussard's visit, and she said at once, "And you don't like it."

" It's not that I don't like it, it's . . ." Then his face hardened, and he stood up. " No, I don't. I'll never agree to it."

" Why? "

Two hours before, Gerald had had no reason. He simply didn't see why his sister should marry anyone. He considered that he had devoted his life to taking care of her, and now it seemed treachery that she should desert him. This was followed by a guilty feeling that he was being selfish; he rejected this; it was the deep natural bond of brother and sister that made him feel, now it was threatened, a chill blowing across the fields while he waited for her to come home.

Then he began to think of Charles Broussard, introducing himself so brazenly on the street in Galveston. Gerald reread their friendship, seeing all Broussard's actions as part of a cruel design. He had too smoothly insinuated himself; Gerald decided he had never liked the man's face, which had persistently reminded him, though he had stifled the thought, of the dead man lying beside his father. What did they know about Broussard? It seemed half plausible to Gerald that he was their father's murderer, out of some hideous gambling impulse presenting himself to his victim's children.

The loss of his father had been the deepest event in Gerald's life; now he seemed about to lose his sister; it seemed entirely logical that his enemy was the same man in both instances.

Beginning with roundabout remarks on how little they knew about their neighbour, Gerald in the end blurted out his thoughts to Cecelia.

There was a silence.

" Well, that is what I think," he said miserably, shocked by his own words, but dog-determined. " How can we know? A stranger."

" If it were true, he must be a brave man to risk coming back here."

" Or a devil," said Gerald.

" Will you say it to his face? " Cecelia said sharply.

On the point of saying, " If you force me to," he paused. Her face shamed him and he said instead, " No."

" And why not? "

" Because I can't be sure. I only feel it isn't right."

" Well, I *am* sure," Cecelia said. Gerald looked at her face, bright with anger or the exertion of her ride. A year ago she wouldn't even have mounted a horse, much less talked to him as she did now.

He saw it was hopeless even before she said, " I have loved him for a year. If you oppose us, I'll marry him anyway." She

softened and came towards him. " Please, Gerald. I won't be far away, we'll always be close. We could even live together in the same house, Charles would be willing."

But she seemed a stranger and a witch to Gerald; he said, " Do what you like," to keep her from touching him, and he went outside.

Their father was buried beneath an oak behind the house, and Cecelia had planted climbing roses along a fence of split logs that separated this garden space from the fields. Charles found her alone there when he came next day, Gerald having ridden to town and left her to answer the proposal herself.

She turned, walked across the dry grass in the hot sun, and raised her arms to draw Charles's face down to hers. He asked what her brother had said.

" He doesn't like it, but he has agreed." Then she paused to find her courage.

After her conversation with Gerald and a silent dinner, she had lain awake all night; in the end she had decided that while she could lie to her brother, she couldn't to her husband. For she knew everything, after all; it had come back to her gradually, beginning with a tremor of uneasiness when she first saw his dark head bowing before her in Galveston and heard him talk about having no family. But then she had known only that she wanted to see him again.

The third time he came to their house, a rainy evening, she was sure. She sat by the chimney, stricken, and watched the fire flash on his wet face; she felt a clutch of excitement which she mistook for a wish for revenge, and she looked to her brother's face for help. But Gerald appeared dry and dead to her, and she looked back at the red mouth and thick dark hair of the other —weak, she thought; he needed someone to take care of him. All evening she watched him. Within a few days he came again, and by then she knew she wasn't free to choose whom she would love. She kept silent.

So she had been able to stare down Gerald's suspicions: she had already lived with the truth for a year. Strange, she thought, that she should have had the strength to shame him out of words which were exactly true, but in which he had no confidence because jealousy had provided them.

Now she took Charles's arm and walked with him beside the fence.

The roses were a kind that bloomed rapidly and incessantly from May to July, three or four blooms to a cluster, passing from bud to ruin in a couple of days, falling in tatters, and quickly

followed by others. Their abundance was feverish, their scarlet was the colour of arterial blood, so bright it vibrated in the sun.

"The very colour of blood," Cecelia said to Charles. Then she simply said, "My brother called you our father's murderer."

She had hoped for nerve, and he did not disappoint her. Broussard pulled her round to face him. "And you, what did you answer?"

"I didn't answer him honestly, but I'll say it to you." She drew away from him to pull one of the roses off roughly and thrust it into a buttonhole on his chest, an abrupt, hurtful gesture, while the branch from which she had picked it swung crazily against the fence. "Those are beautiful to me even when I know their roots grow out of my father's dead body. And I can face what's terrible at the roots of love. I have known for a year who you are, and I love you. If we can live with that, I will marry you."

She frightened Charles. He stammered, "What made you tell me?"

"Because, if you came back to atone, and you want to marry me for any such reason, you needn't. I never thought of that till last night. I won't speak or ever betray you. You can go away free. If you want forgiveness, you have that. I don't want you except in love." She sounded angry, as if that was the only way she could get the words out.

Charles's blood beat inside his head and he looked out past the planted fields to the yellowish open country, wanting, for that moment, nothing so much as to ride away.

He wished he had never come back, and yet no life anywhere else was imaginable.

"Can any two people live with such a thing?" he said.

She said, after another silence, "You're free. There's nothing to hold you, if you want to go."

Broussard trembled, and a darkness came over his eyes. His answer was to bend and kiss her.

Thus it was sealed; they were married a month later and went to live a few miles away on his farm.

It was a happy marriage. Two sons were born to them in their first years together. It was to be expected that Charles's darker looks would predominate in their children, but both boys were fair, with the distinctive Mehan face, as if their father could not imprint himself upon that thinner, determined blood. But Broussard loved his wife and sons, and his farm prospered. By the time the war came in 1847, he had already begun to grow fat and slightly bald in his contentment.

It was otherwise with Gerald Mehan. From the time his

sister married nothing went right with him. In 1848 his barn burnt down. He married a woman from San Antonio who brought him no happiness; when he went away to the war she returned to her family, and after the war, wrote that she would not be coming back to him. Gerald didn't bother to ride to San Antonio to plead with her.

In the first years of their marriage, Charles and Cecelia hardly saw Gerald. But after the war, reluctantly at first, Gerald began to ride over to see his sister and her family on Sundays; later he began coming once or twice during the week. Misery was plain in Gerald's face, which had the concentrated stare of a man done out of his rights. Charles, who had been made uneasy by Gerald's first visits, now felt sorrow for his brother-in-law and a kind of overflow of his love for his wife. He asked if he might help rebuild Gerald's barn, and Gerald agreed. Ten years after they had first met, Broussard had become the solider and older-looking of the two men; his body had grown peaceful, thick; his once light and boyish face burnt to a rich olive colour.

Gerald, on the other hand, was all hard edges and dry alertness. He fed on the past: he occupied himself one winter with writing a memoir of his father; and in the spring he rode to Galveston with the oval miniature of Major Mehan and had it copied as a life-size portrait, which he hung over his fireplace.

Slowly, Charles and Cecelia came to treat Gerald almost like a foster-son. Charles, particularly, tried with a father's embarrassed kindliness to reach Gerald across a gap of morose resistance. And Gerald seemed to hate their happiness exactly as a tormented youth might resent a complacent older generation.

One day the two men were working in Gerald's field. Broussard straightened up, short of breath and slightly dizzy from the sun, and looked over at his brother-in-law bent in furious activity a hundred yards away.

Gerald looked so solitary, straining so without any goal, that in a moment of strong feeling Charles walked over the broken ground to him and laid his hand on Gerald's shoulder. "Gerald, have you ever thought of leaving this and moving over with Cecelia and me? We could handle one place easier than two. I thought of adding a new room this year, and we could build one for you as well."

Gerald stiffened at Charles's touch and stood up straight. "Why, does Celie think I need your charity?"

The sun was so bright that they looked at each other out of slit eyes; Gerald's lips were drawn back from his teeth in a grimace.

Charles said, "No, man, Cecelia has nothing to do with it. It's my idea. I don't like to see any man lonely."

"I built this place with my father," cried Gerald in a rage. "Did you think I'd desert it? You can leave me out of your damnable expansions."

Charles rode home at dusk, slightly sick from the sun, and heavy-hearted. He ate his supper in a daze and never heard his sons' voices asking for a story before they were put to bed. His head ached from the bright glare of Gerald's hatred; he had a fever. They went to bed.

Long after midnight Cecelia woke up and found a bald moon shining in the window, into her husband's open, fixed eyes. When she touched his burning forehead he groaned and began to weep. She made him tell her what had happened that day.

"He made me see myself through his eyes, Cecelia," Charles said, when he had related it. "Working his life out in bitterness, and I, like some fat spider, trying to draw him in and make myself easy. After all these years it came back to me, it burnt me to look in his eyes."

She tried to hush him, but he twisted on the bed and raved. "He made me ugly to myself, trying to buy him off. I haven't deserved to be happy here. I should never have taken you. I should have paid cleanly for what I did."

His wife reached over in the dark and covered his mouth with her hand. "Stop it, I won't listen to it, you're sick. You could have run away and stayed, but you came back. Didn't you give me my life back, and haven't you been good to me and made a good life for us? Are ten years nothing at all, against a moment?"

"It would've been better if I'd never come here," he said.

Cecelia said fiercely, "I'd see my father die again in front of my eyes rather than see you like this. And my brother too—if Gerald ever hurt you I'd kill—"

Now just as she had stopped his mouth, Charles put his hand over hers and said, "Celie, that's what I've done to you." They held each other in silence. Their sons, who had heard their raised voices, began to cry out through the walls.

Cecelia rose to light a candle; and gathering her nightgown at her waist to keep from stumbling, she went on bare feet to the next room to calm the children back to sleep while her husband lay listening, unable to make out her words. In a few minutes the glow of the candle shone out softly ahead of her reappearance in the doorway; Charles raised himself on his elbows to watch her take a last look backwards into the boys' room, with her unbound yellow hair falling about her shoulders. Then she came towards him.

Charles said, "Leave the candle. I don't want to be in the dark yet." In a little while he felt able to sleep, and Cecelia blew

out the flame; the sweetish smoke dispersed in the moonlight.

She said softly, in the darkness, "Without you, I wouldn't want to live."

After this, their life went on peacefully as before. They seldom saw Gerald who began to go away for weeks at a time without mentioning his destination. It was nearly two months before he again paid them an evening visit. Charles lifted his younger son down from his lap and offered his brother-in-law his hand, which Gerald managed in taking off his coat not to see. He had been in Galveston, Gerald said when his sister asked him.

"You're restless lately," Cecelia remarked.

Gerald said, "I suppose it comes out now because I never travelled much when I was younger, as Charles did. Don't you ever yearn for that life, Charles?"

"Never. I never had any life at all until I settled here."

"When I grow up I'll be a sailor like Daddy," the elder Broussard son piped up.

"Me, too," said the other.

"I met a friend of yours in Galveston, Charles, a Captain Breaker . . ." said Gerald, over their heads.

"I said it first," the elder child was saying scornfully to his brother. Cecelia quieted their bickering.

Gerald continued calmly, "He asked to be remembered to you."

"Who was Captain Breaker, Daddy?" asked the younger child. "Were you with him when you saw the whales in the Atlantic? Tell us about the whales again."

His father only stared at the boy uncomprehendingly. The three adults sat perfectly still while the other child turned impatiently from the fire and said, "Not about the whales. Tell about when it was all blue and grass was growing in the middle of the ocean."

Broussard stretched out his hands and took the boy's arms, staring through him so fixedly that the child was rather afraid.

"Well," his father began slowly, in a husky, painful voice, "the water when you see it wash up at Galveston, it doesn't look so pretty. Yellow or dull green or brown—dirty-looking it is, there. But that's just near the shore.

"Farther out, it's different—when you're young, and it's good weather. The water's clear, and as blue as copper sulphate or sapphires—you never saw anything so beautiful, you're free there. You think you'd like to sail for good and never come back to the flat ground again. When you stop in a port, you feel cut down and heavy, walking without the rich swell under you . . ."

"I wanted to hear about the whales," the younger boy said.

"But that's in the early days. Then a time comes, you're out in the Gulf, headed east; you begin to see the yellow weed on the water, amber colour—or like autumn leaves, it's that colour—floating in garlands first, then in bigger patches like a carpet. The wind dies down, it's slow going, you have plenty of time to look at that great empty space of water.

"There's so little to do, you fish up some of the yellow weed to look at. It's got a lot of berries on it, like tiny grapes, but when you pop them between your teeth there's just air inside and the salt-water taste. They don't seem to be any kind of fruit or seed, you see, just little empty bags to make the grass float. The stuff just floats along, living on something in the water or maybe air, I don't know.

"One of the old-timers told me it can live like that for hundreds of years, and maybe the same piece you are holding had floated past Columbus's sailors: they used to be afraid of it because they thought they could get caught in it and not get out. That didn't bother us.

"But what did make me afraid was just the thought of that life without roots, drifting nowhere, without fruit. Some of the men said they'd never leave the sea, but it came to be a horror to me.

"I wanted to get back where roots reached down into the ground, even if it was dark and tangled there. I had to touch the ground even if I died there."

He broke off, and his face cleared. He said to his son, "You know why I'm telling you this?"

"No," the boy said, scared.

"So you'll stay here and farm," Broussard said, "and I can be lazy when I'm old. You go to sea if you want to—right now you're going off to bed."

When Cecelia left the room with the boys the two men sat in silence until Charles began, "How did Captain Breaker—"

Gerald nodded and interrupted him. "He didn't remember you at first, until I described you."

"Yes, I made three trips with Captain Breaker in 1838 or thereabouts, I believe."

"As he recollected it, 1840," Gerald corrected him. "Anyway, he asked to be remembered."

"Thank you. Was that all?"

"Just about." Cecelia came back into the room and found them silent. Gerald yawned and said he'd better ride back. With Cecelia standing between them, Gerald said to Charles, "Are you free tomorrow?"

Charles paused, then said, " I think so."

" I want to clear out some stumps in my south field. I'd be obliged to you if you've got the time to help."

" I'll come over in the morning," said Charles. To Cecelia's questions, when her brother had gone, he said, " Nothing, nothing."

It was just getting light and a mist still lay over the brown land when Charles rode through the gate. Gerald was hitching a mule to his wagon in the side yard; he said good morning without looking at Charles.

Charles, dismounting, watched him carry two axes and some rope from the barn.

Gerald said, " I've broken my chain, so we'll leave the stumps for another day. Some trees have gone rotten and clogged up my creek. I thought we might clear them out and get some firewood while we're at it."

Charles made no answer to this, but climbed up beside Gerald, and they started out. Charles shuddered.

" Chilly," Gerald remarked.

Charles said he would be all right when the sun rose. They bumped along in a silence that was like simple embarrassment; the mist settled in dew beneath the wheels. Charles folded his arms on his chest and thought about nothing, while a hawk wheeled in the red sky and the sun dragged up.

They got down from the wagon outside the cottonwood thicket. Gerald lifted the axes out and shoved the handle of one at Charles. " Here."

Then he withdrew it and stuck out the other. " Or maybe you'd better take this one."

Charles took it calmly. The second axe was older than the first, and he supposed it might be the one that had killed Gerald's father carefully retained all these years. Well, it was an ordinary axe; he did not especially recognize it.

They walked in among the trees, Gerald first. " It looks as if somebody's camped here lately," said Charles, at sight of a circle of black ashes on the spot where he had once sat with his brother.

" I was here the other day," Gerald said. " I've hardly been here twice in ten years. It's not a place I like to come back to . . ."

" Let's get to work, shall we? " said Charles brusquely.

They went to the creek, a pretty, shallow stream running between sandbanks. The sunlight glanced on the tan surface and wavered among the tree trunks. Charles followed Gerald to a bend where a fallen tree blocked the water.

Charles waded at once into the thigh-deep water on the dammed

side of the trunk and Gerald took a stand opposite him, water only up to his calves—Charles suddenly realized his own disadvantage. But he grinned at the cold stab of the water and his spirits rose; he felt confident that Gerald would not attack him, after all this ritual, without a preliminary palaver.

They hacked away in steady rhythm, goaded by mosquitoes, until the trunk divided like a gate, and a cargo of rotten leaves and grass pushed slowly through and moved downstream. They chopped off root and branch enough to drag the halved trunk up on the bank.

By mid morning they had cleared the creek of obstructions and gone to work on the standing dead trees. When they came to the tall one by the ashes of the camp-fire, Gerald slapped its hollowness with the palm of his hand and listened. He cocked his head curiously at Charles.

"Do you believe dead men watch the place where they died?"

Charles took a deep breath of relief and lifted his axe slightly from the ground. Gerald's eyes flickered.

"No, I don't. Your father, you mean?"

"Or the other one," Gerald suggested. "Your friend."

"My brother. It's taken you a long time to get to the point."

They grasped their axes with both hands—a soft slipping sound, quiet as breath. "Captain Breaker spoke well of you, as I told you," Gerald said bitterly. "Said you made a good sailor in 1840—for a man who'd never been aboard a ship before. I should have killed you last night, except for my sister."

"Do you think you can kill me now?" Charles raised his axe and took a step back.

Gerald moved out sideways, stirring his axe in very gentle, stroking circles against the air. "I'd like to spare Celie," Gerald said. At the thought of her, he raised his voice in a kind of howl. "Oh, God! how could she not have known? If you'll leave now and never come back again I'll let you go free and never tell her who you were. Will you go?"

"No," Broussard said. "My wife knows who I am."

"You're lying!" Gerald screamed, and he rushed forward headlong.

Even poised for him, Charles was disconcerted by his cry; Gerald's axe struck the handle of his and Charles stumbled backwards to the ground. Gerald raised his axe over his head and swung down towards Charles's chest; Charles rolled free and the blow cleanly severed the thumb of his right hand. Crazed, he scrambled up, shouting as Gerald was, and grasped the handle of Gerald's axe with his left hand and the fingers of his right.

His blood ran down on Gerald's hands as they fought for the

thing, and Gerald began to laugh hysterically. "Kill me, you murderer! Go home to your wife and tell her you killed her father, and then killed her brother, and a happy life to you!" He went on fighting, grunting and laughing as Charles pushed him against the tree where they had started.

Charles was the heavier, and he at last twisted the axe away and knocked Gerald to the ground with the elbow of his thumbless hand.

"Kill me, kill me!" Gerald cried up at him. "Kill me now, and go home, and tell what you've done."

Charles lifted the axe and threw it crookedly towards the creek. "I don't want to kill you. Why couldn't you leave us alone?"

Suddenly he was taken with dizziness; he closed his eyes and backed away from Gerald, who lay still on the ground with a smear of Charles's blood across his mouth. Gerald watched him closely.

"No more killing," Charles said thickly. "I'll go away. There can't be any peace now ever." He turned and walked sightlessly away.

Gerald lay where he was for a moment and then sprang up and went to pick up Charles's axe where he had left it. Keeping his eyes on the other man's back, Gerald moved noiselessly up on him. But before he was within ten yards, Broussard's knees folded under him and he fell face forward.

Gerald walked nearer and turned him over. His face was grey; blood was flowing freely from his wounded hand. Eyes on Charles's face, Gerald lifted the axe and brought it down, not hard enough. But on the third blow he cut the right arm off entirely, above the elbow.

The main stream of his enemy's blood now began to flood the grass, and Gerald sat down beside him with an alert, solicitous look. In a few minutes Broussard began to rouse. Gerald reached for the axe but then paused and watched, absorbed, very serious, like a boy with a snake. When Broussard opened his eyes, Gerald stood up and planted his boot on his hand. Even so, Charles writhed and nudged feebly at Gerald's leg.

Then he lay back, blinking up at the sky through the trees while Gerald continued to watch him patiently. After a while, Charles's eyes closed.

Gerald didn't move when he heard a horse's hoofs coming near. He listened impassively to Cecelia's voice: "Charles? Charles?"

Craning his neck, but without removing his foot, Gerald watched her dismount and take down a basket from the saddle.

She called to her husband that she had brought his lunch. Listening to the anxiety in her voice, ignoring the words, Gerald sensed that she had come on a pretext. He waited. He knew he was right when she ran so quickly into the thicket that she stumbled into her brother before she saw him.

Cecelia took it all in at a glance, as if she had already imagined it, and gave a great cry. The basket fell, the contents tumbled out on the bloody grass.

Gerald stepped aside and watched his sister throw herself on the dying man. "Oh, Charles, Charles, Charles." She never looked at Gerald.

Cecelia lifted her husband's head and kissed his face dementedly. To Gerald's surprise, Charles's eyes opened for a moment.

"... Stay with you. Not killed."

"Of course you're not, of course not," she said in a light, giddy voice. She looked at Gerald impersonally, as if he were a servant standing by. "Help me get him into the wagon."

"Don't let him near," Charles said in delirium, while Cecelia took the cloth from the lunch basket and bound his arm. "Stay with you."

"I can't lift you alone," Cecelia said softly. "Quick, Gerald." Too dazed to resist, Gerald bent and lifted the heavy shoulders. Cecelia kept babbling, "A little farther, my dearest. We're nearly there. We'll have a doctor soon. Rest."

They came out of the shade of the trees into the hot glare, and as they were lifting Charles into the back of the wagon, his face dropped sideways, dead.

Cecelia looked at him for a moment without tears; then without a word she turned on Gerald and raised her hands as if to tear his eyes out. With little trouble Gerald grasped her wrists and forced her arms behind her. Sweat ran down their faces.

"You know why," Gerald said, as their bodies twisted against each other.

Cecelia stopped struggling and looked at him, her eyes bright and foreign. Gerald couldn't read her face. He said, "What I did was just. I had no choice. I'll take care of you now."

In fear of her gaze, he pressed his cheek against her face for consolation; as he did, she caught his lower lip between her teeth and bit him so terribly that he carried the puckered scar until the day he died. He cried out and drew away from her.

"I'll tell in Galveston what you've done," Cecelia said.

"Do," said Gerald, flinging the blood from his chin with the back of his hand. The hard sun etched Cecelia's distorted face; Gerald stared at her, fascinated and afraid. "Tell it in court,

and bring your pretty boys to hear. I hardly recognize my own sister. He was a murderer, he twisted you."

"He did a terrible thing, but he grew and changed. You, you'll never change. Nothing's in you but your justice and your hate. Your envy. But the blood's the same in me—you'll see how I can hate, Gerald. When I look at you I'll be watching you die."

"Miserable sow, breeding with your father's killer. Hate your brother, and not hate him?"

"*I loved him.*"

At last her tears came to her. She turned to the wagon, and held on to its side while her body quaked. She cried out to the dead man, "Oh Charles, I loved you. There was love in me, keep me from being only his sister again. There's only hate in us. I'll go home to your sons—help me keep quiet, there must be an end. Help me hold my tongue. When I'm an old woman, aching to tell them to kill him, keep me quiet. Help me. Let Gerald die before they grow up, or let me die. And until I can die, stay with me, keep me quiet."

"Stop," Gerald whispered at her in horror. "You don't know what you're saying. No decent man could have done anything but what I did. I'll take care of you. Stop it."

But she was finished. They stood apart in the blinding noon, shadowless. In the distance the air trembled; the dry prairie ached in the heat. Gerald spat the blood from his swelling lip and quietly went to bring Cecelia's horse to the wagon.

When her crazy grief was over, he was thinking, he would bring her back to his father's house where they both belonged. He considered that they could live to forget this day.

He offered Cecelia his hand to help her up beside him, but she turned away and got in at the back beside the dead man. Not once did she take her eyes off his face as the wagon jolted along under the fierce sun.

She said to him, "Oh love, stay with me. I can't answer for what I might do if I should forget you. Keep me quiet, keep me quiet."

SOLUTION TO ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Aphrodite.* 9, *Recoil.* 10, *Hambledon.* 11, *Sickle.* 12, *Dexterity.* 13, *Rescue.* 17, *Dry.* 19, *Spinoza.* 20, *Extreme.* 21, *Bow.* 23, *Lotion.* 27, *Utterance.* 28, *Tocsin.* 29, *Ponderous.* 30, *Opiate.* 31, *Stalemate.*

Down. 2, *Player.* 3, *Rebate.* 4, *Dreary.* 5, *Trotter.* 6, *Penitents.* 7, *Corkscrew.* 8, *Blue Peter.* 14, *Isolation.* 15, *Pistachio.* 16, *Colonists.* 17, *Dab.* 18, *Yew.* 22, *Outpost.* 24, *Feudal.* 25, *Wagram.* 26, *Occult.*

★ *This month's Argosy reprint—by readers' request—is a brilliant little sketch from a master of the short story.*

IN AN ALIEN LAND

BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

I AM of a roving disposition; but I travel not to see imposing monuments, which indeed somewhat bore me, nor beautiful scenery, of which I soon tire; I travel to see men. I avoid the great. I would not cross the road to meet a millionaire; I am content to know the writer in the pages of his book and the painter in his picture; but I have journeyed a hundred leagues to see a missionary of whom I had heard a strange story and I have spent a fortnight in a vile hotel in order to improve my acquaintance with a billiard marker.

I should be inclined to say that I am not surprised to meet any sort of person were it not that there is one sort that I am constantly running against and that never fails to give me a little shock of amused astonishment. This is the elderly Englishwoman, generally of adequate means, who is to be found living alone, up and down the world, in unexpected places. You do not wonder when you hear of her living in a villa on a hill outside a small Italian town, the only Englishwoman in the neighbourhood, and you are almost prepared for it when a lonely hacienda is pointed out to you in Andalusia and you are told that there has dwelt for many years an English lady.

But it is more surprising when you hear that the only white person in a Chinese city is an Englishwoman, not a missionary, who lives there none knows why; and there is another who inhabited an island in the South Seas; and a third who had a bungalow on the outskirts of a large village in the centre of Java.

They live solitary lives, these women, without friends, and they do not welcome the stranger. Though they may not have seen one of their own race for months they will pass you on the road as though they did not see you; and if, presuming on your nationality, you should call, as likely as not they will decline to

see you; but if they do, they will give you a cup of tea from a silver teapot, and on a plate of old Worcester you will find Scotch scones.

They will talk to you politely, as though they were entertaining you in a Kentish vicarage, but when you take your leave will show no particular desire to continue the acquaintance. One wonders in vain what strange instinct it is that has driven them to separate themselves from their kith and kin and thus to live apart from all their natural interests in an alien land. Is it romance they have sought or freedom?

But of all these Englishwomen whom I have met or perhaps only heard of (for as I have said they are difficult of access) the one who remains most vividly in my memory is an elderly person who lived in Asia Minor.

I had arrived after a tedious journey at a little town from which I proposed to make the ascent of a celebrated mountain and I was taken to a rambling hotel that stood at its foot. I arrived late at night and signed my name in the book. I went up to my room. It was cold and I shivered as I undressed, but in a moment there was a knock at the door and the dragoman came in.

"Signora Niccolini's compliments," he said.

To my astonishment he handed me a hot water bottle. I took it with grateful hands.

"Who is Signora Niccolini?" I asked.

"She is the proprietor of this hotel," he answered.

I sent her my thanks and he withdrew. The last thing I expected in a scrubby hotel in Asia Minor kept by an old Italian woman was a beautiful hot water bottle. There is nothing I like more; and next morning, so that I might thank her in person, I asked if I might see the Signora Niccolini.

While I waited for her, I racked my brains to think what "hot water bottle" could possibly be in Italian. In a moment she came in. She was a little stout woman, not without dignity, and she wore a black apron trimmed with lace and a small black lace cap. She stood with her hands crossed. I was astonished at her appearance, for she looked exactly like a housekeeper in a great English house.

"Did you wish to speak to me, sir?"

She was an Englishwoman, and in those few words I surely recognized the trace of a cockney accent.

"I wanted to thank you for the hot water bottle," I replied in some confusion.

"I saw by the visitors' book that you were English, sir, and I always send up a 'ot water bottle to English gentlemen."

"Believe me, it was very welcome."

"I was for many years in the service of the late Lord Ormskirk,

sir. He always used to travel with a 'ot water bottle. Is there anything else, sir?"

"Not at the moment, thank you."

She gave me a polite little nod and withdrew. I wondered how on earth it came about that a funny old Englishwoman like that should be the landlady of a hotel in Asia Minor. It was not easy to make her acquaintance, for she knew her place, as she would herself have put it, and she kept me at a distance. It was not for nothing that she had been in service in a noble English family.

But I was persistent and I induced her at last to ask me to have a cup of tea in her own little parlour. I learnt that she had been lady's maid to a certain Lady Ormskirk, and Signor Niccolini (for she never alluded to her deceased husband in any other way) had been his lordship's chef.

Signor Niccolini was a very handsome man and for some years there had been an "understanding" between them. When they had both saved a certain amount of money they were married, retired from service, and looked about for a hotel. They had bought this one on an advertisement because Signor Niccolini thought he would like to see something of the world. That was nearly thirty years ago, and Signor Niccolini had been dead for fifteen. His widow had not once been back to England. I asked her if she was never homesick.

"I don't say as I wouldn't like to go back on a visit, though I expect I'd find many changes. But my family didn't like the idea of me marrying a foreigner and I 'aven't spoken to them since. Of course there are many things here that are not the same as what they 'ave at 'ome, but it's surprising what you get used to. I see a lot of life. I don't know as I should care to live the 'umdrum life they do in a place like London."

I smiled. For what she said was strangely incongruous with her manner. She was a pattern of decorum. It was extraordinary that she could have lived for thirty years in this wild and almost barbaric country without its having touched her. Though I knew no Turkish and she spoke it with ease, I was convinced that she spoke it most incorrectly and with a cockney accent.

I suppose she had remained the precise, prim English lady's maid, knowing her place, through all these vicissitudes because she had no faculty of surprise. She took everything that came as a matter of course. She looked upon everyone who wasn't English as a foreigner and, therefore, as someone almost imbecile, for whom allowances must be made. She ruled her staff despotically —for did she not know how an upper servant in a great house should exercise his authority over the under servants—and everything about the hotel was clean and neat.

"I do my best," she said, when I congratulated her on this, standing, as always when she spoke to me, with her hands respectfully crossed. "Of course, one can't expect foreigners to 'ave the same ideas what we 'ave, but as his lordship used to say to me, 'What we've got to do, Parker,' he said to me, 'what we've got to do in this life is to make the best of our raw material.'"

But she kept her greatest surprise for the eve of my departure.

"I'm glad you're not going before you've seen my two sons, sir."

"I didn't know you had any."

"They've been away on business, but they've just come back. You'll be surprised when you've seen them. I've trained them with me own 'ands, so to speak, and when I'm gone they'll carry on the 'otel between them."

In a moment, two tall, swarthy, strapping young fellows entered the hall. Her eyes lit up with pleasure. They went up to her and took her in their arms and gave her resounding kisses.

"They don't speak English, sir, but they understand a little; and, of course, they speak Turkish like natives, and Greek and Italian."

I shook hands with the pair, and then Signora Niccolini said something to them and they went away.

"They're handsome fellows, signora," I said. "You must be very proud of them."

"I am, sir; and they're good boys, both of them. They've never give me a moment's trouble from the day they was born, and they're the very image of Signor Niccolini."

"I must say no one would think they had an English mother."

"I'm not exactly their mother, sir. I've just sent them along to say 'ow do you do to 'er."

I dare say I looked a little confused.

"They're the sons that Signor Niccolini 'ad by a Greek girl that used to work in the 'otel, and 'aving no children of me own I adopted them."

I sought for some remark to make.

"I 'ope you don't think that there's any blame attached to Signor Niccolini," she said, drawing herself up a little. "I shouldn't like you to think that, sir." She folded her hands again, and with a mixture of pride, primness and satisfaction added the final word, "Signor Niccolini was a very full-blooded man."

★ ★ ★

To copy from one book is plagiarism; to copy from three is research.

WILSON MIZNER

STRANGER TROUBLE

His gnarled hands trembled about the ju-ju charms on his neck and waist

BY KEN GENTRY

TESHI village stood silent and unpeopled in the full heat of an African afternoon. No human movements came from within the circle of neatly-thatched huts; the hammocks tied between the verandah uprights swung empty and loose.

Short hot gusts of wind spun the red dust of the compound, worried at the cold ash in the fire squares, and rippled the surrounding forest. It was as though the pale sky panted down on these things, with the effort of sustaining its own glaring white hole of a sun.

A thin yellow cockerel appeared suddenly from inside one hut. It stalked quickly across the compound and into the forest fringes, where it turned and squatted, to view the deserted village with troubled amber eyes.

The compound settled into stillness once more, gleaming like a copper arena, a stage, empty of players as yet, but with its air tensed and hushed, ready for their entrance . . .

The two white men stepped from the jungle and, followed by a pair of African bearers, walked slowly to the centre of the compound. They halted, and Adams, the District Officer, pulled a pipe from the pocket of his bleached bush jacket. "Nobody home, eh," he murmured.

His companion, a much younger man, dug the bright ferrule of his walking stick into the dust, squinting through the heat haze towards the encircling forest. "Where have they gone? Shall we chase after 'em?"

"I don't know—and no, we won't. We'll just sit quietly in the shade of a hut and wait for them."

"Wait?"

Adams smiled wearily. "They'll be along when it suits them. Now, for God's sake and mine, David, sit down and have a quiet smoke."

Sighing, he dropped his long body to the ground, and stretched

it out, resting his back against a mud wall. "If I may offer advice from my many years' service," he went on, "I'd ask you to compare the two of us. I'm built like a bean pole and what flesh I have left is the colour of old cork. I've got malaria in my blood, dysentery in my colon, and a great hate in my heart for fast motion.

"You, on the other hand, have England barely seven weeks behind you. You're young, robust, and heathily pink. But in a few years, if you stay in this country, you'll begin to look like me. So, please, don't speed that process by chasing Africans about their own bush when it's over a hundred in the shade."

Green laughed and sprawled out next to him. "With that dreadful day before me, you leave me no alternative." He opened his silver cigarette case. "But seriously, any ideas on this evacuation?"

"Not yet, but N'Gabi is a good chief and far too sensible to stampede his men into anything silly." Adams shook his head, his eyes bright blue in their creased sockets.

"No," he went on, "it's the combination of things that intrigues me. We saw no animals in the bush as we travelled here. We heard no birds. Now, no Teshi. Only this oppressive silence hanging on our ears: Odd."

"Odd's right."

They sat in silence for a long time after this exchange, for the act of speaking, even the thought of speaking, pulled small fountains of sweat from them, and the low-hovering sky seemed to fuse them hard to the earth with the violence of its light.

Then, all at once, as though they had slipped there in between moments of time, the men of Teshi were standing in a circle round the compound, their red and turquoise plumes hanging against the background foliage like bursts of vivid-paint. Each ebony hand gripped a warrior's spear; each arm was hidden behind a leather shield.

"Yes, I've seen them," said Adams, as his companion swung round to him, "war feathers an' all. This looks bad."

"What do we do?"

Adams stood, knocking out his pipe. "Sit tight a moment, David, and I'll have a talk with N'Gabi." He walked forward into the blazing light, halting a few paces from the line of silent Africans. He raised an arm. "Greetings," he said, in the throaty dialect of the Teshi. "I greet my friend, N'Gabi."

A moment's pause, then a tall, hard-muscled man stepped forward, his face calm and thoughtful beneath its mask of paint. His hair was shot heavily with grey. "Why have you come?" he asked in the same language.

"We heard you had trouble and we came to help. Since you greet old friends in the colours of war, it would seem to be true."

"You must go from this place, Adams. There is big trouble coming to Teshi."

"What sort of trouble?"

N'Gabi gestured. "African trouble. Exactly what, we do not know, but Levúma has read of a great disaster that will befall my village during the next few days. It will come with strangers. I do not have to tell you, Adams, that if Levuma says, then it will be."

Adams looked past N'Gabi to where Levuma, the tribe's medicine-man, was standing. Levuma looked like a shrivelled black gnome; his gnarled hands trembled about the ju-ju charms he wore on his neck and waist.

"The old men, women, and children have travelled to a far place," went on the Chief. "We stay to fight whatever appears."

"Then, with your approval, my friend and I will stay also, for we regard Teshi troubles as ours."

"As you wish. But when it comes I ask you to remember that it is African trouble."

The District Officer nodded and returned to Green's side. He told him of Levuma's prophecy. "And don't laugh," he added, seeing the other's face twist in derision. "He looks like a comic turn, I know, but the Africans aren't fools and they believe he has a companionship with the stars."

"Then you think the trouble will come?"

"I'm quite certain it will."

"I know what we do now," Green sighed, "we wait on. I'm learning fast."

"Lucky you are. Lesson number two says that unless you bend with the African wind, your heart most surely breaks."

Once more they settled down in the shade of a hut, both idling over private thoughts, their minds drifting gradually from the reality of the place and moment into a lethargic timelessness in which there was only the sun, the sky, and the white heat . . .

"Ya—owweee!"

A sudden shrill cry of terror jerked every man, black and white, to his feet. A Teshi warrior ran in from the jungle, eyes rolling white with fear. He gasped a few words and a rustle of horror went through the warriors. They crowded into the centre of the compound.

"What is it?" demanded Green. "What's going on? Everyone looks scared to death!"

"The trouble."

"Where? What?"

"Look!"

Green stared in the direction of Adams's pointing finger.

Where before the land had been sullen and still, now it moved. It was incredibly alive. As far as the eye could see, the forest, the grassland, even the distant hills, everything moved, heaving and shimmering as though covered with a thick black turbulent sea.

"What is it?"

"Ants. All the ants in the world."

For some time they had been aware of a faint soporific humming in the air. Now the sound identified itself as the movement of countless millions of bodies, ant bodies, covering every leaf, every blade of grass, every inch of earth for miles, devouring every scrap of life in their path, leaving behind a pale skeleton of a country. From them rose the dank odour of swampland that grew stronger, more pungent as they moved closer.

Other Teshi scouts raced in, reporting that the insects had formed a circle round the village and were converging on it.

"Then we are finished," muttered N'Gabi in English. He pronounced it as an irrevocable fact.

"Finished!" Green wheeled on Adams who shrugged and said nothing.

"The leopard, even, cannot fight them," continued the Chief. "Nothing can. The animals of the forest know this and flee while there is time. They are wiser than men. So we must die."

"Like hell! I'm not going to stand here and wait for 'em!"

"David . . ."

"Can't we wrap cloth round our legs and run through them?"

"These ants are big, with teeth like pincers. They stretch for miles. Run into them and you'll be bitten insane within ten minutes—and a skeleton in ten more. Sorry, son, there's no answer to them—except a miracle."

Green was staring in horror at a giant tree towering above its fellows some hundred yards away. The ants had already covered its massive trunk and were now spreading along its branches, stripping them like a monstrous blight.

"They come every now and then," murmured Adams, "first massing deep in the forest and organizing themselves into battalions, then marching behind chosen leaders. Death feasts with them. They give nothing."

There was a sudden cackle of pain and the cockerel fluttered in from the bush, its thin body covered with scout ants. The bird careered hysterically in small circles before the men, wings flapping, feet pounding the dry earth. Then it rolled in the dust, fiercely kicking and pecking. But fiercer did the insects

cling, biting, tearing, biting, until the fowl was twisted into every contortion of agony.

Soon the ants reached and covered its eyes. The cockerel scrubbed at the dust with its head but could not clear them. A few pecks more, then it squatted on the dust, its beak pointing helplessly to the ground.

"You see," said N'Gabi to Green, "even the stupid fowl knows it cannot fight them."

Adams pulled his revolver and, with a quick step forward, fired it against the cockerel's head. "When they reach us, David," he said, "what you do is up to you. See?"

Green nodded, fumbling at the press stud of his holster, his hands cold, unable to believe, really believe, that within a few minutes he would have to kill himself. Shrill laughter swept into his throat at the idea.

"Mister Adams, sah." One of the District Officer's bearers touched Adams's arm. "Sah, me brudder to ants. Me able to talk wit' 'em."

"Talk with them!" echoed Green, with a high-pitched giggle. "With a million gallons of flaming paraffin, yes!"

"True, sah." The other bearer stepped forward. "He brudder to ants. Wit' my own eyes I see 'um."

"An ant-man." Adams looked excited.

"Yes, sah." The bearer regarded the rapidly-advancing insects. "They big lot. Mebbe too big for turn."

"And maybe not. Get to it, son."

The boy took off his khaki jacket and removed a small leather pouch from one pocket, the contents of which he poured into a hand. They looked like dried leaves. He spat into them, ground them briskly between both palms, then rubbed his hands over his body. This done, he touched the bright red amulet he wore on his left bicep, walked forward several paces, and crouched on his haunches.

Green stared. "Can he really talk with ants?" he asked incredulously.

"Some Africans can. I've never seen it myself, but I've met men who have. In any event, we've got nothing to lose by letting him try."

As Adams answered, the first column of ants swept in from the forest and started across the compound. The leaders could clearly be seen, a cluster marching with mathematical precision a few feet ahead of their followers.

Calmly, the bearer waited until they were within six feet of him, then he stretched out both arms towards them. "Make you turn," he said, in a low insinuating voice, scarcely heard

above the hideous squeaking din. "I your brudder. I tell you for turn from this place."

The insects did not pause in their marching.

"I say for turn. Travel new way. This not a better place for you."

The leaders moved closer together as though conferring.

"Turn." The bearer stood, his voice pitched a few tones higher. He pointed towards the distant hills. "Journey 'way from here."

Suddenly, magically, the leaders halted. At once their followers stopped, forming a circle of dark undulating life about the compound.

"I, your brudder, tell you for turn. Travel new way."

The leaders rose up, swaying like grotesque leaves, seeming to peer into the boy's face.

"Turn." Sweat drained from his back, and the odour of the sap with which he had coated himself hung about him like an aura.

"I say for turn!" Gone was the low voice, the friendly voice; now it snapped, whip-like. "Go from here! Go yonder! I order!"

The leaders dropped to the ground and their waiting armies rustled expectantly. This is it, thought Adams, licking dry lips; this is it. Green held his breath lest in exhaling he might in some way sway the balance of events over which he had not the slightest control. Levuma closed his eyes, muttering ancient words. N'Gabi thought of death. The men of Teshi thought of death also, and some stood poised in attitudes of flight.

For one second more the leader ants remained where they were, and that second was so long as to be spun to eternity. Then, slowly, they turned to face the way they had come, paused a moment to allow the ranks to open and, resuming their former spacing, marched through the gap. And as they passed, their armies, acting as ordered, closed in and followed on.

It was night and the last ant had gone. Now there was a clean silence and the sweet-smelling air moved softly through the jungle. The men, white and black, breathed deeply of it, then went to the huts, talking loudly of trivial things.

All that remained in the compound of Teshi village was a pile of clean white bones, resting where the cockerel died.

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★ ★ ★

When you have read this copy of ARGOSY, why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY

BY H. E. BATES

Everything was "perfick" for Pop Larkin, wealthy scrap-dealer, living off the fat of the land in his Kentish paradise and never paying a penny of income tax. As for poor Mr. Charlton, the young tax man sent by the Inland Revenue to make Pop fill in his buff form—he had been swept off his feet by dark-haired, soft-eyed Mariette Larkin, and was now treated as one of the family by buxom Ma and all the Larkin brood.

When the Brigadier called, Pop was delighted to offer the local bigwigs and Miss Pilchester the use of his buttercup field for the Gymkhana.

"DAMN good field of yours, Larkin," Miss Pilchester said. "No doubt about that. Just the job."

In the buttercup field where Mariette and Mr. Charlton had been the evening before, the grass had been cut and baled during the day. Big fragrant cotton-reels of hay lay scattered everywhere between the house and the river. Only a white and yellow fringe of moon-daisy and buttercup remained standing at the edges, pretty as a ruffle under the hedgerows of hawthorn, rising honeysuckle, and wild rose.

The evening seemed warmer than ever, but Miss Pilchester, secretary of the Gymkhana, a fortyish, slightly-moustached brunette shaped like a bolster, was wearing a thick thorn-proof skirt of cabbage-green and a cable-stitched woollen cardigan to match.

Miss Pilchester surveyed the field with critical, organizing eye, seeing on it a vision of jumps, judges' tents, show-rings, beer-tents, and horses. It was awfully decent of Larkin to lend it, she said,

otherwise everything would have been absolutely ghastly. Everything to Edith Pilchester was always absolutely ghastly. She lived alone and kept numbers of laying hens. The hens were absolutely ghastly, and so, even worse, was living alone. It was all absolutely ghastly.

"Always like to oblige," Pop said, and laughed in cheerful fashion. Miss Pilchester laughed too. One of the things she always liked about Larkin was the man's inexhaustible cheerfulness. Friendly chap.

Swallows were flying high above the meadows and the river, swooping in the blue hot sky, and Miss Pilchester might almost have been one of them in the quick, darting glances of gratitude she gave to Pop.

"All yours," Pop said. "Come and go just as you like. Any time."

Another thing Miss Pilchester liked about Pop was the terrific easy generosity of the chap. Good sport. She had once been casually kissed by Pop at Christmas at a village social, in some game or other, and the experience, for her at least, had been something more than that of two pairs of lips briefly meeting. It gave you the same feeling, she thought, as smelling bruised spring grass, or new-mown hay for the first time.

"All we want then is a fine day," Miss Pilchester said. "If it's wet it'll be absolutely ghastly."

"Can't control the tap water, I'm afraid," Pop said and laughed again, at the same time remarking how thirsty he was. "Might put something in it, though, if you feel like it now. Drop o' gin? Drop o' whisky? Glass o' port?" Miss Pilchester darted towards Pop another rapid, swallow-like glance of approval, half affectionate, half grateful, her eyes so momentarily absorbed in the baldish, perky profile with its dark side-linings that she quite forgot to say that anything was absolutely ghastly.

Back in the yard a van from the bacon factory had just delivered all of Pop's two pigs, except the four sides and two hams, which had been left for curing. In the kitchen Ma, now a white-aproned expansive butcheress, was busy trimming several score pounds of pork and pork offal; cheerful as ever she stowed it away in the new deep-freeze.

As Pop put his head through the kitchen door Ma said, "Dr. Leagrave's in the sitting-room. I said you wouldn't be long."

"Come to see Mariette?"

"No, pipe down, you loony. Nobody knows anything about that. No, just on his way back from the golf course. Just passing."

"Thirsty, I expect," Pop said. "Still, just the job—we can get him to run the rule over Mister Charlton."

In the sitting-room Pop introduced Miss Pilchester to Dr. Leagrave, who was a heavyish man in his fifties, rather red-necked in a Teutonic sort of way, and completely bald.

Television was on, out of natural habit, and the programme was one of opera, the composer being a man named Wagner, of whom

Pop had never heard. Pop gave the screen a cursory, whipping glance—the programmes were never much catch Tuesdays—and wondered if everybody on it had gone stark, staring mad.

It was a relief to turn to drinks and Miss Pilchester. "Now, Miss Pilchester. Edith." Miss Pilchester bloomed softly, smiling, as Pop called her Edith. "What shall it be? Drop o' whisky? Drop o' gin? Drop o' Guinness? I can make you a cocktail."

Miss Pilchester said she thought cocktails were absolutely ghastly. "No, whisky for me. And soda, please."

Dr. Leagrave chose the same. Pop decided to have his favourite Dragon's Blood with lime.

"Your day off, Doc?" he said.

"It must be absolutely ghastly in this heat," Miss Pilchester said, "sick-visiting and all that."

"Not that so much," the doctor said. "Trouble is it's a nice fine evening. By now, my waiting-room'll be as jam-packed as a cinema with Lolla showing."

Sipping whisky, an astonished Miss Pilchester asked why that should be and got the answer not from Dr. Leagrave, but from Pop himself, as quick as a swallow. "Ain't got nothing better to do. That's why."

"Hit it plumb on the head," the doctor said.

"You mean it makes a difference," Miss Pilchester said, "what the weather is?"

"More perfick the wevver," Pop said, "the more they roll up."

"Fast becoming a nation of hypochondriacs," the doctor said and Pop looked suddenly so startled at yet another word he had never even heard on television that he couldn't speak. That was the second within a few days. "Pill-takers. Drug-takers."

"Ghastly."

"Then there are young doctors," Dr. Leagrave said, now launching on a tried and favourite theme, "men of not very great experience, who are prescribing a hundred, two hundred capsules of new and highly-expensive drugs to patients who take two and put the rest into the kitchen cupboard."

"Ghastly."

"By the way, Doc," Pop said, "we got a young friend of ours staying here who's bad a-bed and wuss up. Think you could have a look at him?"

"What's wrong?" the doctor said. "Not another pill-addict, I hope."

"Lumbago."

Pop said he would try to find Mr. Charlton and started to go out of the room, remembering as he did so the kitchen piled with pork. "Nice piece o' pork for you when you go, Doc," he said. "How about that? You too, Edith. Like chitterlings?" Pop laughed in his infectious, rousing fashion.

Miss Pilchester, who had not yet been reduced to eating chitterlings, nevertheless laughed too. Always made you feel happy, that man, she thought.

Pop came back with a rather hesitant but sun-scorched Mr. Charlton, red-faced from a second day in the strawberry fields and more ravenously hungry than he had ever been in his life.

"Here's our young friend," Pop said. "Friend of Mariette's. Mister Charlton. Been very poorly."

"Well," the doctor said, "perhaps we can have a look at you." He glanced uncertainly round at Miss Pilchester. "Is there somewhere—"

"Upstairs," Pop said. "I'll lead the way."

Mr. Charlton followed Pop and Dr. Leagrave upstairs. On the landing Pop paused to whisper confidentially to the doctor that there would be a whole leg of pork if he wanted it; he hadn't very well been able to say it in front of Edith—the Doc would understand? The doctor, swaying a little, said he understood, and Pop opened the first door on the landing without knocking.

"This'll do," he said. "Mariette's room."

Fortunately the room was empty and presently Mr. Charlton, stripped to the waist, found himself lying face downwards on Mariette's bed; his sensations very like those he had experienced when the geese had entwined their necks about his legs, when he had worn Mariette's pyjamas, and when, in utter ecstasy, he had breathed the fragrance of gardenia for the first time. The hot room was thick and intoxicating with that same deep, torturing fragrance now.

The doctor pressed his fingers gently into Mr. Charlton's lumbar region. "Much pain?"

Mr. Charlton confessed that he had no pain whatever.

"Comes and goes? That it?"

"Sort of like that."

"Suppose you'd like to go on sick benefit for a couple of weeks?" To the doctor's astonishment Mr. Charlton said no, he didn't think so. He was, though he didn't say so, having a wonderful time in the strawberry field. He was earning money. If he went on sick benefit he wouldn't earn any money and he wouldn't have half the fun. He was learning to use his loaf.

"Well," the doctor said, "try to keep out of draughts when you're hot." He laughed briefly, swayed tipsily, and thought of how perhaps it would be possible to snatch another quick one downstairs before he took the leg of pork and went home. "And avoid lying in wet grasses."

Some time after the doctor had gone Pop wrapped up two pounds of loin of pork, about a pound of liver, and a pair of pig's trotters and said that, if Edith was ready, he would run her home. Edith Pilchester, charmed with three whiskies and enough food to last her until Sunday, was more than ready.

"Got a Rolls now," Pop said.

In the yard Pop spent some time, with touches of imperial pride, showing Miss Pilchester the Rolls' burnished monograms, the silver vases for flowers, and the speaking-tube.

As they drove along Pop demonstrated first the town horn, the

sweet one, then the country, the snarl. Miss Pilchester enjoyed this but said, " Not so fast. I don't like driving so fast," remembering that she lived less than a mile away. Accordingly Pop slowed down, driving with one hand and with the other half caressing, half pinching Miss Pilchester's knee. Since she wore only loose lisle stockings this, he found, was not half so delicious an experience as pinching Ma, who wore nylons and very tight ones at that, but to Miss Pilchester it seemed to be a source of palpitating pleasure. She again became like a swallow, darting nervous, rapid glances.

A few minutes later the Rolls drew up at Bonny Banks, Miss Pilchester's cottage, tiny, thatched, and low-pitched, which she had converted out of a fallen-down cow-byre in prewar days, when things were cheap. It looked shabby by comparison with Pop's paradise.

Miss Pilchester begged Pop over and over again not to look at it. It was simply ghastly, absolutely ghastly.

" You'll come in for a moment though, won't you? "

Pop had always wanted to see the inside of Miss Pilchester's cottage. He groped his way through the kitchen, which smelt stale from unwashed dishes, and into a living-room as dark and cramped as a bolt-hole.

" Do take a pew if you can find room, won't you? " It was difficult, if not impossible, to find a pew. Miss Pilchester hastily removed a basin of eggs, a half-finished jumper, two skeins of wool, *The Times*, a sewing-basket, some grey underwear, and an unplucked brown fowl from various chairs.

" Sit you down. I'll have a drink for you in a jiff. Don't mind anything. I'll just find a plate for the pork and then get some glasses."

Remains of a boiled egg, a cup of cocoa, and a burnt raspberry tart—*the left-overs either of breakfast or lunch or both*—lay scattered about the table. Miss Pilchester gathered up egg and cocoa, dropped the shell into the cocoa, and then upset the resulting mess into the raspberry tart.

She went to look in various kitchen cupboards for a bottle of whisky, which she knew was there. It wasn't there and it was some moments before she found it tucked away behind another pile of underclothes, a basket of clothes-pegs, and a vegetable marrow left over from last year.

An inch of whisky lay in the bottom and Miss Pilchester remembered she had not bought another bottle since she had had a cold at Easter, over six weeks before. She put another inch of tap water into the bottle and then poured the whisky and water into two glasses, and calling, " Just coming. Sorry I kept you so long," went out of the kitchen to find Pop glancing at *The Times*, a newspaper he had never heard of before.

" No television? " Pop said.

" Couldn't possibly afford it."

" Terrible," Pop said.

Miss Pilchester said, " Cheers." Drinking an economical sip of whisky, she thanked Pop once again for being so nice about the

field. " Going to pay your Hunt subscription next season? Hope so."

Pop said of course he was going to pay a subscription; and one for Mariette, too.

The Hunt, Miss Pilchester said, was going down. Hardly anybody had the time. The Christmas Meet last year had been an absolute ragtag and bob-tail. It was simply ghastly.

" Captain Prettyman's retiring as Master next year," she said. " Never has been any good. Never got hold of the right end of the stick from the beginning."

She darted Pop another of her rapid, swallow-like glances.

" You're the sort of chap they ought to have. New blood to pep them up."

Pop could hardly bear it. In an uncertain spasm of ambition he actually had a swift vision of himself as Master of Foxhounds. It was dazzling. At the present time he paid a subscription but never rode to hounds, though Mariette always did. The incredible idea of his being Master had never once occurred to him.

" Here, steady on, old girl," he said. " You'll get me started thinking things."

Miss Pilchester, remembering the brief interlude when Pop had pressed her knee in the car, laughed as softly as she could. " Well, that's always nice, isn't it? " she said. " You've been an absolute lamb. Don't know how—".

She turned suddenly to find herself wrapped in Pop Larkin's arms, being kissed in splendid silence, with something of the effect of a velvet battering-ram. This was the way Pop always kissed Ma but Miss Pilchester, for her part, had never experienced anything quite like it. It had on her something of the effect of Pop's cocktail on Mr. Charlton: it explored with disquieting fire a few far corners of her body that she hardly knew existed before.

When it was over Pop retired a few inches, took breath, and said, in almost exactly the tones he always used when mixing cocktails at the glittering Spanish galleon, " How about one more? "

" Please."

" Perfick," Pop said.

Five minutes later a palpitating but very happy Miss Pilchester, trebly kissed—one more for luck, Pop had said—came to the gate of the little garden wilderness to wave him good-bye. She felt dedicated for ever, with abandon, to the generous, passionate Mr. Larkin.

" See you soon." She waved.

" Any time," Pop said. He laughed merrily. " Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The last of Miss Pilchester's darting glances, this one almost of fire, seemed actually to set the Rolls in motion and with a neat, side-long wink he drove away.

He'd have to tell Ma, he thought, about the Master of Foxhounds lark. No, he wouldn't, though. He'd keep that after all; she'd say he was flying too high.

When he arrived home Ma was sitting outside the kitchen door, enjoying a Guinness and a few potato crisps after her battle with the pork. It was still hot in the semi-darkness, but Pop feared he could hear, in the distance, a few muted notes of thunder.

" Where's Mr. Charlton? " he said.

" Been writing letters," Ma said. " Just gone off with Mariette to post them."

" *Writing letters?* " Another high, incredible mark of credit for Mr. Charlton.

" Whatever's he got to write letters for? "

Impossible to understand how anybody could write letters.

" I think he's been writing to the tax office."

" Not about us," Pop said. " He ain't got nothing to write there about us."

" Oh no! " Ma said. Enjoying her Guinness, she was quite unperturbed. " I think he's gone and extended his sick leave. That's all. Since he saw the doctor. Going to stay another week or two."

" Perfick," Pop said. " Jolly good."

Pop went into the house to pour himself a Dragon's Blood. When he came back Ma said, " Well, did you kiss her? "

" Course I did."

" I thought you would." Ma sat with the Guinness balanced on the precipice of her rolling stomach like a little black doll, again completely unperturbed. " Do her good. Make her sleep all the sweeter. What was it like? "

Pop considered. He remembered how, in the twilight, some portion of Miss Pilchester's moustache had brushed against him. " A bit like trying to catch a mole," he said, " in a dark entry."

Ma dug him sharply in the ribs and started laughing like a jelly. Pop laughed too at his own joke and then stared up at the sky, his attention wrapped for some moments by the young, unquenchable summer stars. A few drops of rain fell, as if by a miracle, from a cloudless heaven, and then ceased in a whisper. Laughing made Pop give a sudden belch and far away, across miles of windless fields, somewhere in the dim hills, nature echoed him in a scarcely audible double note of thunder. Ma looked at the stars too, and Pop told her, true amazement in his voice, about Miss Pilchester's little Tudor bolt-hole and how perfickly awful it was.

For a few moments longer they sat in silence, until at last Ma said, " Well, I'm waiting."

" What for? "

" Don't you think it's about time you kissed *me*? It's coming to something," Ma said, " when I have to ask you for one. Are you tired? "

Pop demonstrated that he was far from tired by kissing Ma with prolonged velvety artistry. Ma responded by settling back in her chair into a cocoon of silence unbroken except for an occasional exquisite breath of pleasure, exactly like the murmur of a kitten in a doze.

In the far distance new waves of thunder rolled. From the cloudless heaven a few fresh warm drops of rain fell. For some moments they splashed the two faces as lightly as a sigh but Pop and Ma, like the youngest of lovers, did not heed them at all.

On the day of the pony Gymkhana Mr. Charlton was up at half past four. The morning was humid, dreamy, and overcast, with low mist on the river. Pop, who had already been up an hour, giving swill to pigs and fodder to the Jersey cow, and was now stanching the first pangs of hunger with a few slices of bread and Cheddar cheese doused half an inch thick with tomato ketchup, said he thought " the wevver looked a little bit thick in the clear," but otherwise, with luck, it ought to be all right by noon.

Mr. Charlton breakfasted on two nice lean pork cutlets, some scrambled eggs cooked by Mariette, fried potatoes, and four halves of tomato.

" In the old days," said Pop, whose estimation of Mr. Charlton rose almost every time he talked to him, especially on occasions like coming down to breakfast at a good time and getting outside a reasonable amount of food, " my dad used to tell me that they always had beer for breakfast. Like a glass o' beer? "

Mr. Charlton thanked him and said he didn't think he would. Mariette had just made tea.

" Well, I think I will," Pop said. " I don't think a lot o' tea is all that good for you."

Pop, after pouring himself a Dragon's Blood, had much the same breakfast as Mr. Charlton, except that there was a lot more of it and that his plate was gay with mustard, ketchup, and two kinds of Worcester sauce. Mariette, who looked pretty and fresh in dark green slacks and a pale yellow shirt-blouse, said she was so excited she could hardly eat, but nevertheless managed two eggs and bacon, a pint of milk, and four slices of bread.

Ma was not yet down, but had sent word that as the day was going to be a long one she was having a lay-in, which meant she would be down by half past six.

Towards the end of breakfast Pop turned to Mr. Charlton, who had not been able to keep his eyes off Mariette for more than two seconds since she had come into the kitchen tying up her hair with a thin emerald ribbon, and said, " Are you two going to feed and water the donkeys? I've got forty thousand jobs to do, and Miss Pilchester'll be here by six."

Mr. Charlton said of course they would feed the donkeys and helped himself to a fifth slice of bread, and covered it half an inch thick with fresh Jersey butter made by Ma. Pop watched this process with immense admiration, telling himself he had never seen such a change in a man's health as he had witnessed in three weeks in Mr. Charlton.

Mr. Charlton was still on sick leave.

" Oh, those sweet donkeys! " Mariette said.

The donkeys that she and Mr. Charlton were going to feed were

not the rest of the Larkin household but four animals Pop had secured for racing. Pop thought that gymkhanas were sometimes inclined to be on the dull side, what he called " a bit horse-face like—so many folks with long faces you can't very often tell the mares from some of the old women "—and that therefore something was needed to enliven the customary round of trotting, riding, leading rein, jumping, bending, and walk, trot, canter, and run.

This was why he had thought of the donkeys and why, later on in the day, he thought of introducing a few private harmless jokes of his own. To his grievous disappointment the Committee had turned down his offer of fireworks. It might well be, they had pointed out, that a few ponies would be late leaving the ground and that some fireworks would in any case go off early and the ponies be distressed.

" What time is the cocktail party, Pop? " Mr. Charlton said.

Pop was delighted that Mr. Charlton now called him Pop.

" Ma thinks eight o'clock would be the perfick time."

" What a day," Mariette said. " All this and cocktails, too."

She went on to confess that she had never been to a cocktail party and Pop said, " Come to that, neither have I. Neither has Ma."

" What do people normally drink at cocktail parties? " Mariette said.

" Cocktails," Mr. Charlton said slyly, and before he could move she gave him a swift playful cuff, exactly like that of a dark soft kitten, across the head.

" Not at this one, you don't," Pop said.

Since Pop had been unable to indulge himself with fireworks, he and Ma had decided that there must be something in their place. A cocktail party, Pop said, would be the perfick answer. Ma agreed, but said they ought to keep it very select. Not more than thirty people, she thought, at the outside.

Neither Pop nor Ma had any idea what you ate at cocktail parties; therefore Mr. Charlton was consulted. " Canapés, vol-au-vents, pistachios, and that sort of thing," Mr. Charlton said.

A lot more marks for Mr. Charlton, Pop thought, as once again he heard words he had never even heard on television.

" You mean nuts and things? " Ma said. " They won't keep anybody alive very long. I'd better cook a ham."

Pop warmly agreed; the ham was firmly decided upon. Ma could cut plenty of the thinnest white and brown sandwiches, with nice Jersey butter. And what else?

Mariette said she thought small pieces of cold sardine on toast would be nice. " They're absolutely marvellous hot, too," Mr. Charlton said, and got himself still more marks by also suggesting small squares of toast with hot Welsh rarebit, chicken sandwiches, and little sausages on sticks.

Most of this, to Pop, seemed rather light, unsatisfying fare.

" We want to give 'em enough," he said. " We don't want 'em to think we're starving 'em. What about a leg o' pork? "

To his disappointment Mr. Charlton said he rather ruled out the leg of pork.

" All righ+," Pop said. " What about drinks?"

Mr. Charlton said he thought it made it so much simpler if you stuck to two or, at the outside, three good drinks: say sherry, port, and gin-and-French.

He suggested the port in case the evening was cool. He got no marks this time. Pop thought that it was all about as dull as flippin' ditchwater.

With sudden enthusiasm Pop said, " What about champagne? "

Both Ma and Mariette said they adored champagne. Something extra nice always happened, Mariette said, when you had champagne, and it seemed to Pop that he saw her exchange with Mr. Charlton an intimate glance of secret tenderness that left him baffled and unsatisfied. Couldn't be nothing in the wind?

" Well, champagne it is then! " Pop said. " Might as well do the thing properly."

Here Mr. Charlton remarked with tact that since not everybody liked champagne it might be just as well to have some other drink in reserve.

" I'll make a few hair-curlers," Pop said. " Red Bull—remember that one? And Ma Chérie."

Mr. Charlton remembered Red Bull. It had rammed him one evening after a hardish day in the strawberry field. It was not inaptly named.

It was half past five before Mr. Charlton and Mariette got up at last from breakfast and went across the yard to feed the donkeys. The four little donkeys had been tied up in the stable that Pop had built with his eye on the day when all the family, with the possible exception of Ma, would have a pony or a horse to ride. Two donkeys had been hired by Pop; two had been brought over by their owners the previous night. Three more, it was hoped, were still to come.

As soon as Mariette and himself were in the half-dark stable, among the donkeys, Mr. Charlton took her quickly in his arms and kissed her. His arms and hands, as they tenderly touched her face, breasts, and shoulders, were as brown as her own.

Mariette laughed, trembling, and said she'd hardly been able to wait for that one, the first, the loveliest of the day. Mr. Charlton, with something like ecstasy, said he hadn't been able to wait either. He could hardly wait for anything. Above all he could hardly wait for the afternoon. " Nor me," Mariette said, and held her arms out to him again.

Quietly, as the second kiss went on, the donkeys stirred about the stable, swishing tails, restless. Hearing them, Mariette partly broke away from Mr. Charlton and said with half-laughing mouth, " I suppose there's a first time for everything. I've never been kissed among donkeys before."

Quick as a swallow himself, Mr. Charlton answered. It was the answer of a man sharpened by three weeks in the strawberry field,

living with the Larkins, and using his loaf. " Wait till the cocktail party," he said.

It was almost half past ten before Miss Pilchester fell bodily out of the taxi she had hired in desperation, four hours late, to bring her to the meadow. Pop, who was helping the Brigadier to string up gay lines of square and triangular flags about and among the tents, stared in stupefaction at a figure that might have been that of a tired and collapsing mountaineer descending from a peak. Miss Pilchester was armed with shooting stick, rolled mackintosh, a leather holdall containing a spare cardigan, her lunch, and a red vacuum flask, an attaché case containing the judging lists, several books, and a basket of pot-eggs. The pot-eggs, evidently brought for use in some pony event or other, rolled about the squatting Miss Pilchester exactly as if, in a sudden over-spasm of broodiness, she had laid them all herself.

Pop, for once, was utterly without words. It was the Brigadier who spoke for him. " Good God, Larkin," he said, " Edith must be either tight or broody."

Five minutes later Miss Pilchester, the great organizer, was at her work. This was all done, as the Brigadier himself pointed out, at a half canter. With indecisive excitement Miss Pilchester rushed from tent to tent, inquiring if someone had seen this, somebody that, had the caterers arrived, and above all wasn't it ghastly? The caterers had been on the field since seven o'clock; all of them had knocked off for tea. Where, then, was the loud speaker for announcements? Hadn't that arrived? It had arrived and Miss Pilchester tripped over two lines of its wires. Cancelled entries. Were there any cancelled entries?—all entries, she wailed, should have been cancelled by nine o'clock.

It was now, the Brigadier was heard to point out, half past ten.

At half past eleven the sun broke through, beginning to dry at last the heavy dew on the grass, the trees of the bluebell wood, and the hedgerows. From the completely windless river the last transparent breaths of mist began to rise. A few water-lilies were in bud, heads rising above wet leaves, and they looked like pipes, gently smoking.

It was then discovered that Miss Pilchester had completely forgotten to meet a London train, as she had faithfully promised, at ten forty-five. The train was bringing a judge who had, in counties west of London, a great reputation for judging such things as The Horse of the Year Show. The Committee had specially asked for him.

" Mariette and Mr. Charlton are fetching him in the station wagon," Pop said. " They've gone to collect more champagne. Ma didn't think we'd got enough."

" Champagne? What champagne? Who ordered champagne? "

" I did."

" Not for this show? "

" Cocktail party," Pop said. " Me and Ma. Instead of the

fireworks tonight. You got your invite, didn't you? Mariette and Mr. Charlton sent all the invites out."

The word fireworks dragged Miss Pilchester back to Pop's side like a struggling dog on a lead. "Now you will promise, won't you, no fireworks?"

"No fireworks," Pop said.

Miss Pilchester, remembering Pop's delicate investigation of her knee in the Rolls, the velvety battering-ram of the kiss that, as Má had predicted, had made her sleep so much more sweetly, now permitted herself the luxury of a half-smile. "I know you. Sometimes you're more than naughty."

Sun twinkled on Pop's eyes, lighting up the pupils in a face that otherwise remained as dead as a dummy.

"Not today though," Pop said. "Got to behave today."

"And promise, no fireworks!"

"No fireworks."

As she disappeared Pop reminded the Brigadier of how he had said Miss Pilchester was a splendid organizer and all that.

The Brigadier was more than kind. "Well, in her own sweet way I suppose she is. Fact is, I suppose, she's the only one who can spare the time. Nobody else has the time."

Going to the beer-tent Pop found that the bulldog of a judge had arrived and was drinking with two members of the Committee. The judge was a squat ebullient man in a bowler hat. With a ruddy, crude, thick-lipped man who was wearing a yellow waistcoat under his hacking jacket, he kept up a constant braying duet, swaying backwards and forwards, waving a pint mug of beer.

Pop found a companion some moments later in Sir George Bluff-Gore, who owned a large red-brick Georgian mansion that was too expensive to keep up. He and his wife somehow pigged it out in a keeper's cottage instead. Bluff-Gore, yellowish, funereal, stiff, and despondent, was not the sort of man you could clap on the back to wish him well.

Nevertheless Pop did so.

Bluff-Gore, recoiling with dejection, managed to say that it was nice of Larkin to invite him and Lady Rose to this cocktail party.

"More the merrier," Pop said and then remembered that the Bluff-Gores had a daughter—Rosemary, he thought her name was—a big puddeny girl with sour eyes and a blonde fringe, whom he had sometimes seen riding at pony gymkhanas with Mariette. "Hope the daughter's coming too?" Pop said. "Welcome."

"Rosemary? Afraid not. Lives in London now."

"Oh?" Pop said. "Doing what? Working?"

With increasing gloom Bluff-Gore gazed down at the grass of the beer-tent and thought of his only daughter.

"Gone over to art," he said.

It was as if he spoke of some old despicable enemy and Pop could only say he hoped it would turn out well.

Drinking again, deciding that Art could only be some man or other that Rosemary had run off with, he suddenly switched the

subject, charging the unready Bluff-Gore with a startling question.

"When are you going to sell Bluff Court, Sir George?"

Bluff-Gore looked white. For some moments he could find no suitable words with which to tell Pop that he had no intention of selling his house, Bluff Court, even though it was far too large to live in. Bluff Court had sixty rooms, an entire hamlet of barns, dairies, and stables; half a mile of greenhouses and potting sheds, and an orangery where, for fifty years, no oranges had grown. You needed a hundred tons of coal to heat it every winter and eighteen gardeners to keep the place tidy and productive in summer. You needed to keep twenty servants to wait on you.

But to give it up, to sell it, even though you hadn't a bean, was unthinkable. It was a monstrous idea; it simply couldn't be entertained. It might be that one day it would be possible to let it to one of those stockbroker chaps who played at farming, made colossal losses, but in the end came out on the right side because they got it out of taxes. It just showed, of course, what the country was coming to. It was grim. No wonder everybody you met was worried stiff. The country was committing suicide. "What makes you think I have any intention of selling Bluff Court?"

"Well, you don't live in the damn thing," Pop said, straight as a bird, "do you? And never will do, if you ask me."

Bluff-Gore indicated with funereal acidity that he was, in fact, not asking him.

"Damn silly," Pop said. He started to say that it was like having a car you never rode in and then decided on a more illuminating, more contemporary metaphor and said, "Like having a television set you never look at."

The illustration was, however, lost on Sir George, who had no television set. "There are certain aspects other than material," he said, "that have to be borne in mind."

Pop said he couldn't think for the life of him what they were.

Bluff-Gore looked with tolerant irony and an oysterish half-smile at the perky, side-lined face. "You were not thinking of buying the place, by any chance, were you?"

"Course I was." The gentry were, Pop thought, really half dopes sometimes. "What d'ye think I asked you for?"

The oysterish smile widened a little, still ironically tolerant, for the next question. "And what would you do with it, may I ask?"

"Pull the flippin' thing down." Pop gave one of his piercing, jolly shouts of laughter. "What else d'ye think?"

"Good God." By now Bluff-Gore was whiter than ever. The eyes themselves had become oysters, opaque, sightless jellies, wet with shock, even with a glint of tears.

"Lot o' good scrap there," Pop said. "Make you a good offer."

Bluff-Gore found himself quite incapable of speaking; he could only stare emptily and with increasing dejection at the grass of the beer-tent, as if mourning for some dear, unspoken departed.

"Cash," Pop said. "Ready as Freddy—why don't you think it over?"

Laughing again, he made a final expansive swing of his beer-mug, drawing froth, and left the speechless, sightless Bluff-Gore standing dismally alone.

All afternoon Mr. Charlton watched Mariette taking part in the riding and jumping events she had chosen. Once again, as she took her pony faultlessly through the walk, trot, canter, and run, he could hardly believe in that astral delicious figure, yellow, fawn, and black on its bay pony. Impossible almost to believe that it was the girl who had helped him undress on the billiard table, scratched the eyes out of Pauline Jackson, and worked with him in the strawberry field. He had never been so happy in his life as he watched her.

Ma was happy, too. Who wouldn't be? All the children were properly dressed for the occasion, wearing hacking jackets, jodhpurs, and proper riding caps, even though only Mariette and Montgomery were going to ride. Each of them went about sucking enormous pink and yellow ice creams; and the twins, who took so much after Ma, had large crackling bags of popcorn and potato crisps.

Nor were there any flies on Ma. She was wearing a silk costume in very pale turquoise, with slightly darker perpendicular stripes. She had chosen a rather large dark blue straw hat that shaded her face nicely and, as the milliner had predicted, " helped to balance her up a bit." Her shoes were also blue, almost the colour of her hat, and her hair had been permed into stiffish little waves.

The only thing that really bothered her was her turquoise rings. They had started to cut into her fingers again. She would have to have them off.

While Ma wandered about with the children, and Mr. Charlton watched the various events, listening with pride every time the loud speakers spoke the name of Miss Mariette Larkin, Pop was spending some time behind the beer-tent, trying to induce Miss Pilchester to ride in the donkey Derby.

The ladies' donkey Derby was a late, inspired idea of Pop's. He had managed to persuade the Committee that they owed it to him in return for the field. He had also found a silver cup. He had once bought it at a sale, thinking it would be nice to stand on the sideboard.

Irresistible though Miss Pilchester always found him, she could not help thinking that this afternoon, in the brilliant sun, Pop looked even more so. He was wearing a suit of small, smart brown-and-white checks, an orange-brown tie, and a new brown Edwardian cap.

For the second or third time Pop urged Miss Pilchester to be a sport. " Just one more rider to make up the seven."

" Who else is riding? I have never even ridden a donkey in my life before."

" All girls of your age."

Miss Pilchester darted one of her rapid glances at Pop. The cast

of suspicion died in her eye as she saw the new brown cap. How well it suited him.

"What about that time I took you home in the Rolls?"

"What about it?"

"Best kiss I've had for a long time."

"You make me feel shy," Miss Pilchester said.

"Beauty," Pop said. "Haven't been able to forget it."

Miss Pilchester hadn't been able to forget it either; she had even wondered if it might ever be repeated.

"I admit it was far from unpleasant, but what has it to do with the donkey Derby?"

Pop started to caress the outer rim of Miss Pilchester's thigh. "Coming to the cocktail party?"

"I think so. Yes, I am."

"Repeat performance tonight at the cocktail party. Promise."

"I know those promises. They're like pie-crusts."

At four o'clock Miss Pilchester was ready to ride in the ladies' donkey Derby.

A quarter of an hour before that Montgomery and Mr. Charlton had ridden in the men's donkey Derby. Most of the donkeys, including Mr. Charlton's, had had to be started with carrots and the race had been won by a pale sagacious animal named Whiskey Johnny, who didn't need any carrots. Mr. Charlton had ridden three yards and then fallen off. His mount had instantly bolted, ending up in stirring style far beyond the tea-tent, by the river.

When Pop went to collect Mr. Charlton's donkey, which was called Jasmine, he found it staring with detached interest at a soldier and a passionate, well-formed young blonde, both of whom were oblivious, in the grasses, of the presence of watchers.

Jasmine, Pop thought, seemed so interested in what was going on that after being led away some paces she turned, pricked up her ears, and looked round, rather as if she wanted to come back and see it all again.

After all this Pop selected Jasmine for Miss Pilchester to ride. At the starting point the animal stood dangerously still, in stubborn suspense, while Pop gave earnest ante-post advice to Miss Pilchester, who sat astride.

Miss Pilchester gave a hasty glance round at the other competitors, dismayed to find them all young, effervescent girls of sixteen or seventeen. She herself felt neither young nor effervescent and the donkey was horribly hairy underneath her calves. "Don't mind them, Edith. Don't look at them. Look straight ahead—straight as you can go. Hang on like grim death."

Miss Pilchester became vaguely aware of carrots, in orange arcs, being waved in all directions. A few animals trotted indifferently up the track, between shrieking, cheering rows of spectators. One trotted at incautious speed for thirty yards or so and then, as if inexplicably bored about something, turned and came back. Another sidled to the side of the track and leaned against a post, allowing itself to be stroked by various children, including Victoria

and the twins. Two girls fell off, screaming, and there were gay momentary glimpses of black and apricot lingerie.

Jasmine stood fast. "Git up, old gal!" Pop said, and started to push her. "Git up there, Jasmine!" Pop put his weight against her rump and heaved. Nothing happened, and it seemed as if Jasmine had sunk her feet into the ground.

It was all absolutely ghastly, Miss Pilchester was just thinking, when over the loud speaker a voice started up an announcement. The loud speaker gave a few snappy barks. Jasmine cocked her ears and broke through with frenzy the final waving arcs of carrots, leaving Pop on the ground, and everybody scattered.

Miss Pilchester, as Pop had so earnestly and correctly advised, hung on firmly and desperately with her knees, just like grim death, and in thirty seconds Jasmine was back at the river, once more staring into the world of grasses, water-lilies, irises, and a soldier's summer love.

Half dismounting, half falling, a dishevelled and demoralized Miss Pilchester stood staring too. It was all absolutely and utterly ghastly and it only made things worse when the soldier, disturbed in the middle of his technique, looked up calmly and said, "Why don't you go away, Ma? Both of you. You *and* your sister."

Pop, uncertain as to quite who had been invited to the party and who had not, spent most of the rest of the afternoon hailing odd acquaintances, generously clapping them on the back, and saying, "See you at eight o'clock. See you at the party." The result was that by half past eight the billiard room was a clamorous, fighting mass of fifty or sixty people, one half of whom had never received a formal invitation.

"I never thought we asked this lot," Ma said. "Hardly enough stuff to go round—"

"Let 'em all come," Pop said.

The billiard room was the perfick place, he thought, for having the party. The billiard table, covered over by trestle table-boards and then with a big white cloth, was just the thing for the eats, the champagne, and the glasses.

Through the thickest fog of smoke Pop had ever seen outside a smoking concert he and Ma, helped by Mariette, Mr. Charlton, and Montgomery, served food, poured out champagne, and handed glasses round. Every now and then people collided with each other in the crowded fog and a glass went smashing to the floor. Nobody seemed to care about this and Ma was glad the glasses had been hired from caterers. That was another brilliant idea of Mr. Charlton's.

Now and then someone, almost always someone he hardly knew, came up to Pop, squeezed his elbow, and said, "Damn good party, Larkin, old boy. Going well," so that Pop felt very pleased. Ma too moved everywhere with genial expansiveness. In the crowd she seemed larger than ever, so that whenever she moved her huge body from one spot to another a large open vacuum was formed.

In one of these spaces, alongside a wall, Pop found the two Miss Barnwells, Effie and Edna, who to his infinite pain and surprise had no crumb or glass between them. The Miss Barnwells, who were thinking of applying for National Assistance because times were so bad, were two genteel freckled little ladies, daughters of an Indian civil servant, who had been born in Delhi. Among other things they kept bees and their little yellow faces, crowded with freckles, looked as if they were regularly and thoroughly stung all over.

"Nothing to eat? Nothing to drink?". Pop could hardly believe it; he was shocked. "I'll get you a glass o' champagne."

"No, no," they said. "Nothing at all like that."

"Terrible," Pop said. "Nobody looking after you. I'll get you a sandwich."

Coming back a moment or two later with a plate of Ma's delicious buttery ham sandwiches, he returned to the painful subject of the Miss Barnwells and their having nothing to drink at all. "Glass o' beer? Drop o' cider? Glass o' port?"

"No, no. No, thank you. We are quite happy."

"Have a Ma Chérie."

The air seemed to light up with infinite twinkling freckles.

"What is a Ma Chérie?"

Ma Chérie was hardly, Pop thought, a drink at all. "Soda with flavouring," he said.

"That sounds quite nice. Perhaps we might have two of—"

Pop was away, pushing through the foggy crowd to the living-room, where he presently mixed two Ma Chéries, double strength, adding an extra dash of brandy to hold the feeble things together.

"There you are. Knock that back."

The Miss Barnwells, who hardly ever had much lunch on Saturdays, took their glasses, chewing rapidly, and thanked him. The air danced with freckles. He was, they said, infinitely kind.

"I'll keep 'em topped up," Pop said.

"Mr. Larkin, isn't it?" A tallish lady in a small grey tweed hat with a peacock feather in it smiled at him over a piece of cheese toast and a glass of champagne. "Lady Bluff-Gore. You remember?"

Pop remembered; they had met occasionally at village socials.

"I hear you made an interesting suggestion to my husband this afternoon."

"Oh, about the house? That's right. Time it was pulled down."

"Would it be too much to ask what you feel it's worth?"

"Could take a squint at it tomorrow," Pop said, "and let you know."

Nothing like striking the iron while it was hot, Pop thought. That's how he liked to do things. In a couple of hours he could get a rough idea what bricks, tiles, doors, flooring, and hard core he would get out of it.

"Mightn't it be an idea to come to some little arrangement? You and I?"

Women were clever, Pop thought. That showed you how clever women were. All the same under their skins. He snapped on. Lady Five Per Cent, he would call her now.

"I get you," Pop said.

"Good. Shall I let you know when we might have another little talk?"

Back in the smoky, clamorous fog he discovered the Miss Barnwells gazing at empty glasses. How had they liked the Ma Chérie? Quite delicious, they thought; and he went away to fetch them more.

In the comparative quiet of the sitting-room, where it was getting dusk, he got the impression that the entire billiard room would, at any moment, blow up behind him. The place was a whirring dynamo, rapidly running hot.

"And what about me?" It was Miss Pilchester, furtive against the Spanish galleon.

"Having a nice time?"

"It'll be nicer when you've kept your promise."

Might as well get it over, Pop thought.

"Lovely party. Such luck with the weather."

Pop put down the two Ma Chéries and braced himself. Miss Pilchester simply didn't know how to hold herself for the act of kissing and Pop seized her like a sheaf of corn. There was a momentary bony stir of corsets and Miss Pilchester gave a short palpitating sigh. She had determined, this time, to give everything she'd got. For all the velvet artistry he put into it, Pop could make little impression on lips so well fortified with teeth that he felt they might at any moment crack like walnuts underneath the strain.

"Thanks. That was just what the doctor ordered. Time for one more?"

"Last one," Pop said. "Must get back to the party."

With thrilling silence Miss Pilchester gave everything she'd got for the second time. It was almost too much for Pop, who throughout the kiss was wondering if, after all, he might indulge in a firework or two. Finally Miss Pilchester broke away, widely gazing up at him.

"And in case I don't get another chance of seeing you alone again, thanks for everything. Marvellous day. All your doing. Simply wouldn't have been anything without you. Best Gymkhana we've ever had. And this party. Made me very happy."

The length of the speech suddenly seemed to take away the rest of her capacity for calm. She gave something like a sob, patted Pop's cheek, and rushed hurriedly away. Once more she had forgotten to say how absolutely ghastly everything was.

Taking two Ma Chéries back to the Miss Barnwells, Pop found them laughing merrily, chewing at their seventh ham sandwich.

"Going positively to drag you away if you'll let me."

The longest, slimmest, coolest hand Pop had ever touched suddenly came and took him sinuously away from the munching

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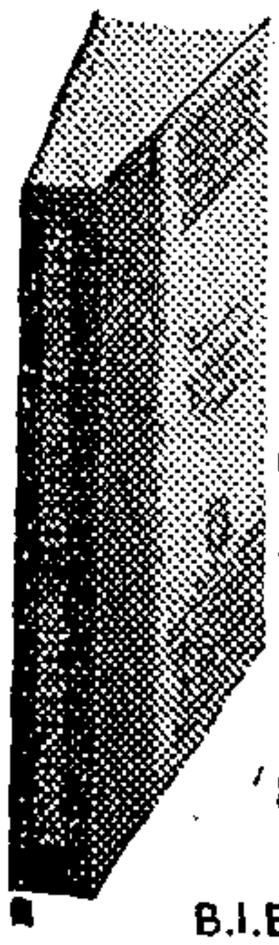

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Miss Barnwells, now eagerly sipping at their second Ma Chéries.

"They tell me you practically organized this whole bun-fight single-handed."

A tall, aristocratically-fair girl, so fair that her hair was almost barley-white, with a figure like a reed and enormous pellucid olive eyes, had Pop so transfixed that, for a moment, he was almost unnerved. He had never seen her, or anyone like her, before. "The thing positively went like a bomb."

The cool, long hand still held his own. The large pale eyes, languidly swimming, washed over him an endless stream of softer and softer glances. "And this party. What a slam."

Her dress was pure clear primrose, with a long V-neck. She wore long transparent earrings that swung about her long neck like dewy pendulums.

"Going to have a party of my own next week. Say you'll come."

Pop, who had so far not spoken a word, murmured something about he'd love to, trying at the same time to decide where and when he'd seen this unheralded vision before, deciding finally that he never had.

"Gorgeous party. Do you dance at all?"

"Used to fling 'em up a bit at one time."

"Scream." She laughed on clear bell-like notes.

Bewitched, Pop again had nothing to say. A vacuum left by Ma, three or four feet away from him, made him feel quite naked before it filled up again.

"That donkey ride, they tell me, was your idea. Blistering success." Pop, with a certain touch of pride, admitted it.

"The seven foolish virgins. Scream. Couldn't stop laughing." She held him captured with moist, splendid eyes.

"But you thought of the virgins. That was the stroke. Absolute genius. Absolute scream, the virgins."

She suddenly gave Pop what he thought was a fleeting, sporting wink. "So few, after all, aren't there?"

To Pop it now began to seem that he might have met, under the sheer primrose sheath, the dancing earrings, the aristocratic voice, and the shining languid eyes, a character something after his own heart and kind.

"But seriously, dear man, what I came to say was this. My name's Angela Snow. Emhurst Valley. We've got one of these pony-trots coming off in August—what say you come over and bring the donkey outfit and make that one go with a bang?"

The word bang made Pop remember something. It was, he thought, the one thing needed to make the day a perfick one.

"Like fireworks?"

"Love 'em. Adore 'em."

"Stay here," Pop said, "while I fetch you a drop more champagne." He started to struggle through the smoky screen hemming him in on all sides and then remembered something and came back to her. "Or a cocktail? Rather have a cocktail?"

"Adore one. Just what I need."

"This way." He started to lead the way to the sitting-room, but halfway he was stopped by Mr. Charlton and Mariette, who said, "Pop, Charley has something he'd like to say to you."

"Not now," Pop said. "Busy now."

"It's terribly important. It's something he's *got* to ask you."

Mr. Charlton looked unexpectedly strained and tense. Must have found out about the baby, Pop supposed. Pity.

"Be back in five minutes," he said, and followed the tall, reedy, primrose figure into the sitting-room.

There, over his Spanish galleon, he asked the dewy, languid girl which she would rather have: Rolls Royce, Red Bull, or Chauffeur. Red Bull was the blinder, he said.

"Red Bull, then, dear," she said. "What names they give them nowadays."

Pop mixed two double Red Bulls and in the falling twilight the elegant Angela Snow knocked hers back with the coolest speed, like a man. "One more of these, dear boy, and I'm ready."

Pop was ready too. Ten minutes later the first firework went off like a bomb under Ma, who showed hardly any sign of disturbance at all. The tall reedy girl put two jumping crackers under the Brigadier's wife, and another under Sir George Bluff-Gore. Ma started laughing like a jelly, and Pop put a Mighty Atom under the billiard table where it set the glasses ringing like a xylophone. The two Miss Barnwells started giggling uncontrollably and said it reminded them of a puja in Delhi. Miss Pilchester was heard saying she knew this would happen, and that it was absolutely ghastly, and she'd hide under the stairs.

People started running from the smoky house into the garden, where the tall, languid girl had a big fizzing Catherine Wheel already going on the walnut tree. A few rockets started shooting up from empty champagne bottles into a sky now summerly dark, cuckoo-less, and completely canopied with cloud. Pop did what he had so long wanted to do and put a beauty under Miss Pilchester, who started shrieking she was burnt.

Upstairs Primrose, Victoria, and the twins hung out of the bedroom windows shouting, laughing, and eating the day's last ice-cream, potato crisps, and apple-tart. In the middle of it all, Mariette and Mr. Charlton tried once again, with little success, to speak with Pop, who was running about the flower beds waving a Golden Rain, calling like a Red Indian, happy as a boy.

When finally Pop had thrown the Golden Rain over a damson tree, Mr. Charlton said, "Pop, I want to speak to you. Ma says I can marry Mariette if you'll let her—"

"Perfick," Pop said. "Let her? Course I'll let her."

The tall, willowy girl was everywhere, selecting victims. The sky was comet-bright with sprays of silver stars, rockets, and Golden Rain. A Roman Candle went off with shattering concussion behind the walnut tree, and Mr. Charlton begged of Pop, "Pop, Ma says, if you agree, will you announce it? She says, now's the perfect time."

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" Perfick it is an' all," Pop said. " Never thought of that."

A quarter of an hour later Pop was standing on a chair outside the billiard room, announcing to the gathered guests, in the smoky garden, with a touch of imperial pride in his voice, together with a certain sadness, that Mr. Charlton was going to marry his daughter, Mariette, and had everybody got their glasses filled? " Give you the toast," he called into the smoky summer air. " Charley and Mariette! "

As he lifted his glass a stunning explosion split the air, knocking him yards backwards.

" One for his nob! " Mr. Charlton shouted.

" What Paddy shot at! " Ma screamed, and started choking in helpless laughter.

It was the last devastating Roman Candle of the tall primrose girl. " Quite perfect," she said.

When it was all over and even television had closed down, Ma and Pop sat alone in the kitchen, Ma now and then shaking all over as she remembered the donkeys, Miss Pilchester, and the way Pop had been blown flat on his back by the Roman Candle.

" Nothing at all to eat? " Pop inquired.

" Think there's another apple-tart," Ma said, and got up to get it from the fridge. The apple-tart was large and puffy, with white castor sugar sprinkled on its lid of crust. With it Ma brought two plates, a knife and, out of sheer habit, the bottle of ketchup. " By the way, who was that girl in the yellow dress? She was a spark."

" Never seen her in me life. Somebody said her father was a judge."

" Oh? " Ma said. " Well, I suppose there's a throw-back in every family."

Pop cut two six-inch slices of pie. He gave one to Ma, and then started to eat the other in his fingers, at the same time ignoring, much to Ma's surprise, the bottle of ketchup.

" Don't you want no ketchup? "

" Gone off ketchup a bit," Pop said.

" Oh? " Ma said. " How's that? "

" Makes everything taste the same."

Ma, who thought this was odd, went on to say what about port?

" Just got some more in," Pop said. " Started to order it now in two-gallon jars."

He got up, found the jar of port under the stairs, and poured out two nice big glasses, inquiring at the same time where Mr. Charlton and Mariette were.

" Having a quiet few minutes in the sitting-room."

Pop said it was very nice about Mr. Charlton and Mariette, and had Mr. Charlton found out about the baby?

" She's not going to have a baby now," Ma said. " False alarm."

" Jolly good," Pop said. " Perfick."

Ma sat meditatively fingering her turquoise rings, which seemed

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to be getting tighter every day, while Pop listened to the sound of the first gentle summery feathers of rain on earth and leaves as it came through the open kitchen door.

" I am, though," Ma said.

Pop looked mildly, though not disagreeably, surprised.

" How did that happen then? "

" How? What do you mean, *how*? "

Pop said he meant when did it all date back to.

" That night in the bluebell wood," Ma said. " Just before Mister Charlton came. You said you thought there was a wild duck's nest up there and we went to have a look."

" That night? " Pop said. " I never even thought—"

Pop cut himself another biggish slice of apple-tart. Ma, he noticed, hadn't quite finished hers. She was always a slow eater. She was still fingering her turquoise rings, as if for some reason she was engaged in thinking, though Pop couldn't imagine what about, unless it was the baby.

The turquoise rings, however, put a thought into his own mind, and he gave a short soft laugh or two, no louder than the summery feathers of rain.

" If this lark goes on much longer," he said, " you and me'll have to get married as well."

Ma said she thought it wouldn't be a bad idea perhaps.

" I've got to have my rings cut off again anyway," she said. " We might as well do it then."

For some moments Pop sat in complete silence, still listening to the rain and wondering about the baby and if Ma wanted a boy and what names they would pick for it when it came.

Ma sat wondering too, mostly about what it would be like to be married. She couldn't imagine at all.

Eventually Pop spoke. " Thought up any names for it? " he said.

" It? " Ma said. " I've got a funny feeling it might be twins."

" Marvellous. Perfick," Pop said.

Ma, who had in fact thought a very great deal about names, went on to say that if it did turn out to be just a boy, which she hoped it wouldn't, or just a girl, what about Orlando and Rosalind —out of that play they saw on television the other night? A very nice play.

Pop said he thought they were jolly good names, just the sort of names he liked. And what if it was twins?

" Well," Ma said, " I've been thinking. If it's girls I thought of Lucinda and Clorinda. I think they're very nice. Or if it's boys, I wouldn't say no to Nelson and Rodney. They were admirals."

" Not so bad," Pop said. " I like Lucinda."

" Couldn't very well make it a double wedding, I suppose, could we? " Ma said.

" Might ask Mister Charlton."

" Why Mister Charlton? "

" He knows about things. Look what he knew about the party."

Pop had just finished his second slice of apple-pie and was

wondering about a third when Mr. Charlton and Mariette came in from the sitting-room. He said how glad he was to see them, and how he could congratulate them now it was quieter. He said he and Ma weren't half glad about things, and that it didn't seem five minutes since Mister Charlton had arrived.

"How about a glass of port, you two?" While he was pouring out two more nice big glasses of port, he couldn't help thinking how pretty Mariette looked in her black, semi-fitting cocktail dress with its white cuffs, collar, and belt. He hoped all the girls would take after Ma. He thought too how nice it was about Mariette and the baby—just as well to start with a clean sheet about these things.

"Well, cheers," he said. "God bless," and with a sudden affectionate impulse got up and kissed Mariette. "Couldn't be more perfick."

Ma, who said she wasn't going to be left out, then got up and kissed both Mariette and Mr. Charlton; and then Mr. Charlton and Pop shook hands.

"Got a bit of news of our own now," Pop said. "Shall we tell them, Ma?"

"You tell them."

"Well," Pop said, "we thought we'd get married, too. Ma's going to have another baby."

Mr. Charlton, who only a month before would have been more than startled by this announcement, didn't turn a hair. Nor did Mariette seem unduly perturbed. The only thing that suddenly occurred to Mr. Charlton was that this was a time when it was essential, if ever, to use his loaf.

"Now, wait a minute," he said, "this wants thinking about."

"There you are, Ma," Pop said. "I told you."

"Why does it want thinking about?" Ma said.

Mr. Charlton took a thoughtful sip of port. "I was thinking of the tax situation," he said. "You see, it actually doesn't pay to get married. It actually pays to live in—" He was about to say "sin" but abruptly checked himself, too late to prevent Ma, however, from being a little upset.

"Don't you use that word," she said severely. "I know what you were going to say."

Mr. Charlton apologized and said what he really meant was that if he were them he'd keep the status quo. This was the first time Pop had ever heard such astonishing un-English words used under his own roof, but it meant more marks for Mr. Charlton. Ma, forgetting that she had been very nearly outraged a moment before, could only look on in silent, fervent admiration.

"Quite happy as we are, I suppose, eh Ma?" Pop said. "Nothing to worry about?"

Not that she could think of, Ma said.

"All right. Let's go on in the old sweet way."

Mr. Charlton agreed. "By keeping to the old way," Mr. Charlton said, "you'll be better off when the time comes."

"When what time comes?" Pop said. "For what?"

"To pay your tax," Mr. Charlton said. "It's bound to catch up some day."

"That's what you think!" Pop said.

"I'm afraid they'll take notice of the Rolls. They're bound to say—"

"That old thing," Pop said. "Never! Took it for a debt." Suddenly Pop started laughing as heartily as Ma had done when the girl in the yellow dress had blown him off the chair with the Roman Candle.

Ma laughed piercingly too, and said, "Oh, that reminds me. Are you going back to that office?"

"That's right, Charley," Pop said. "Are you ever going back to that lark?"

Mr. Charlton, thoughtful again, said he supposed if he didn't go back he'd lose his pension.

The word pension made Pop laugh even more than the idea of the tax lark. "You mean sit on your backside for forty years and then collect four pounds a week that's worth only two and'll only buy half as much anyway?" He urged Mr. Charlton to use his loaf. Mr. Charlton could not help thinking that it was high time he did.

"I tell you what," Pop said. "I'll be doing a nice little demolition job very soon. Some very good stuff. Big mansion. What say we pick the best out and build you and Mariette a bungalow in the medder, near the bluebell wood?"

"Oh, wonderful, wonderful Pop!" Mariette said, and with eyes impulsively dancing, came to kiss his face, and lips, and hair, so that Mr. Charlton knew that there was, really, nothing more to say.

"Well, that's it then," Pop said. "Perfick. Now who says one more glass o' port? And then we go to bed." It would top it all up to have a cigar and watch Ma get into the transparent nylon nightgown.

"Yes, time to get a little beauty sleep," Ma said.

Pop poured out four more nice big glasses of port, saying at the same time how glad he was about the rain. It was just what the cherries, the plums, and the apples wanted now.

"Shall you come cherry-picking too?" Mariette said to Mr. Charlton, but in answer he could only look at her olive skin, the dark shining eyes, and the firm young breasts with silent fascination.

Some moments later Pop took his glass of port to the kitchen door, staring out at the summer darkness and the rain. Mr. Charlton felt an impulse to join him and stood there staring too, thinking of how spring had passed, how quickly the buds of May had gone and how everything, now, had blossomed into full, high summer.

"Listen," Pop said. "Perfick."

Everybody listened; and in the dark air there was the sound of nightingales.

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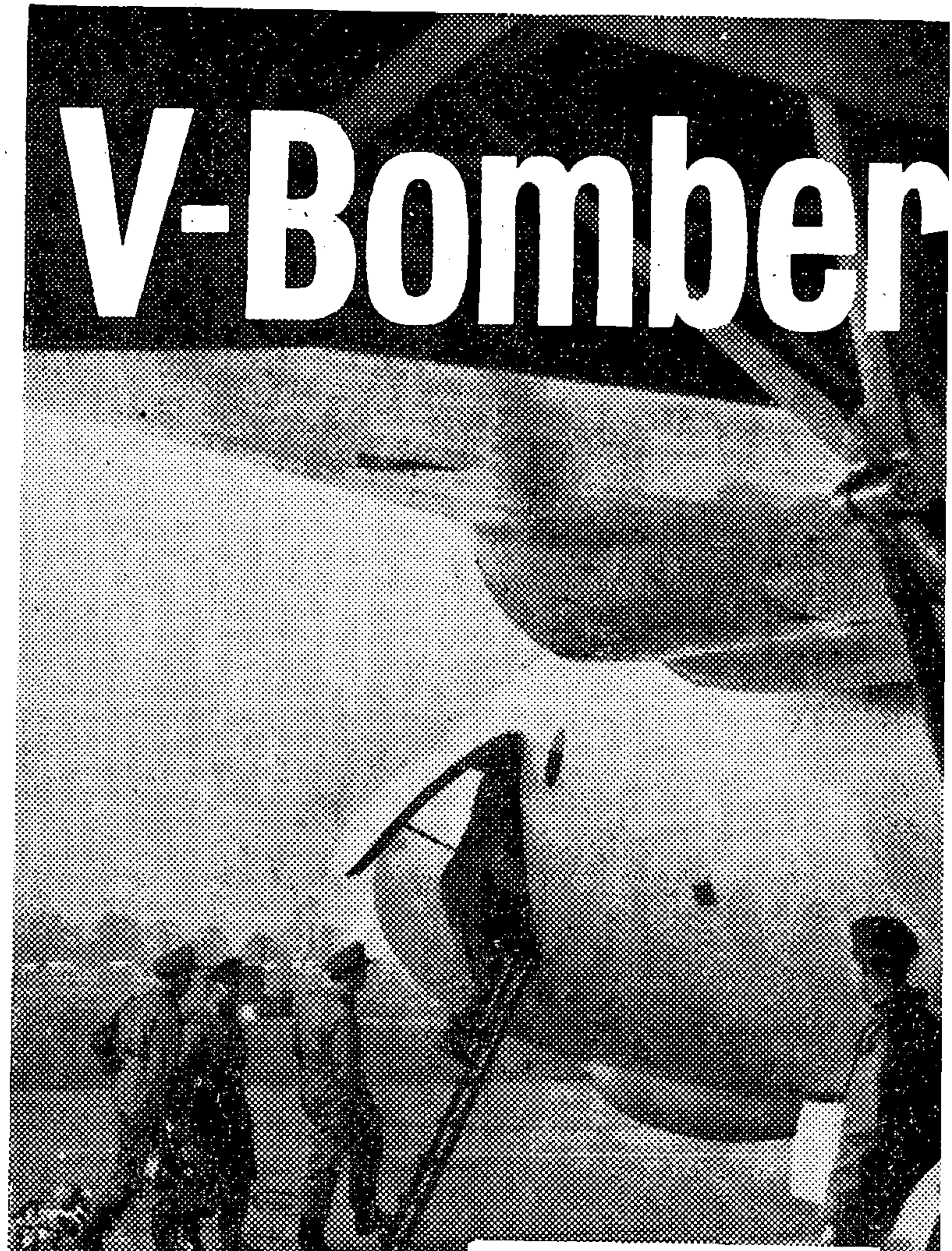

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 102

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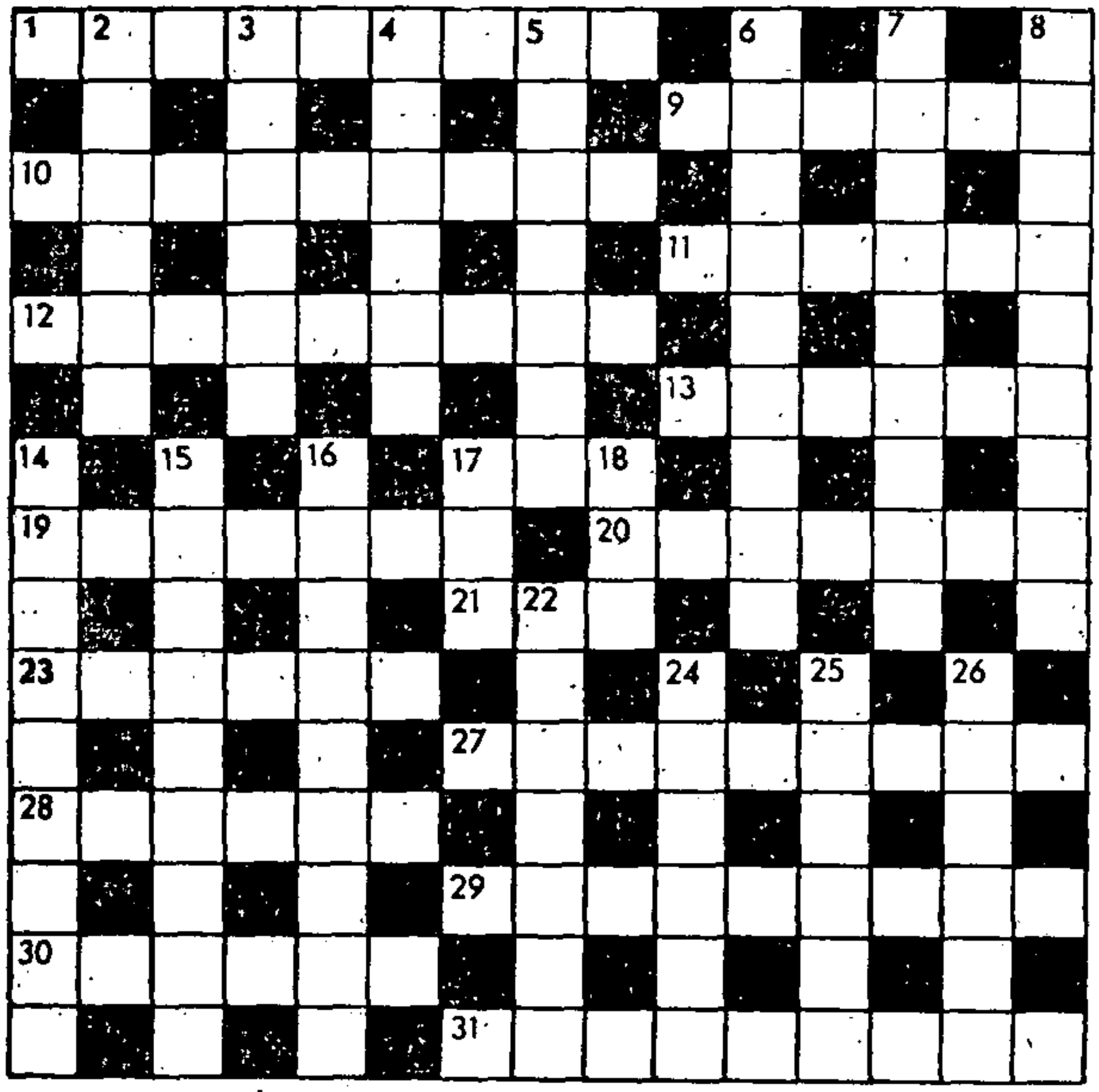


CLUES

Across

1 Her girdle, though no waspie, was fetching (9)

9 There's a twist in this comeback (6).

10 First home of cricket (9).

11 Hammer's associate (6).

12 Right sort of skill (9).

13 Engineer's signal for succour (6).

17 Thirsty as a poet with no den (3).

19 Philosopher met in a spin round Oz (7).

20 Very fanatical (7).

21 Submit politely (3).

23 Not oil, but gives skin-deep beauty (6).

27 Speaking to the bitter end ? (9)

28 Such as warned of Puss in well (6).

29 Weighty, seems thought-provoking (9).

30 " Or emptied some dull — to the drains " (John Keats) (6).

31 Chess fixture, or insipid spouse (9).

Down

2 Flannelled fool? Anyway, no gent (6).

3 It can be discounted (6).

4 Dismal whisker when dun-coloured (6).

5 A foot within the sty (7).

6 The sorriest of folk (9).

7 Lightship crew, or bottleneck easer (9).

8 Chill apostle indicates a voyage (4, 5).

14 Emerson said genius needs it (9).

15 Oasis pitch is more than nutty (9).

16 Settlers who came to a stop ? (9).

17 Fish up to no good (3).

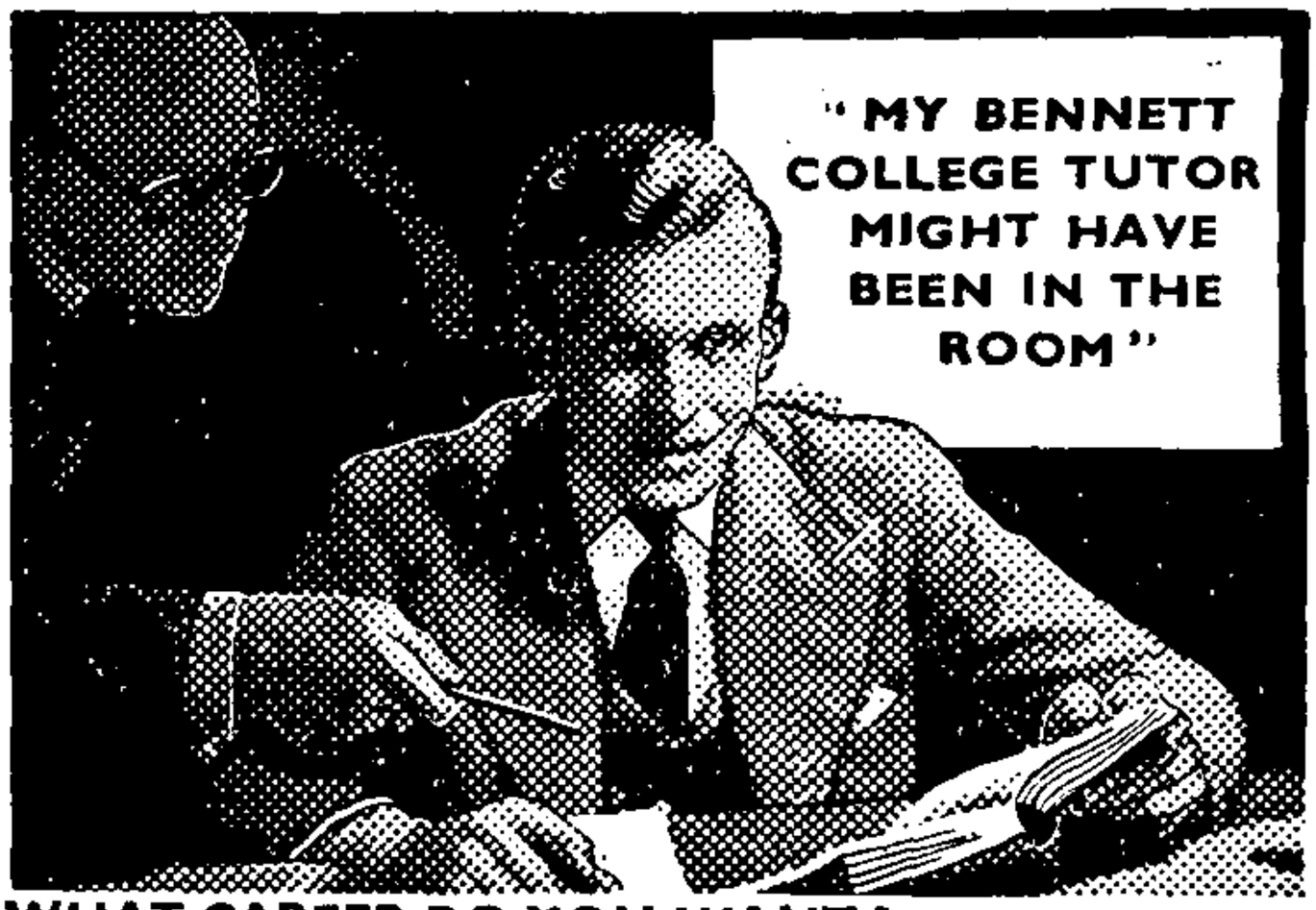
18 " And never a spray of —— " (Matthew Arnold) (3).

22 Advanced base for outgoing mail (7).

24 System of organized villeiny (6).

25 Clown and sheep in Napoleonic battle (6).

26 Mystic belief of commanding officer ? (6).



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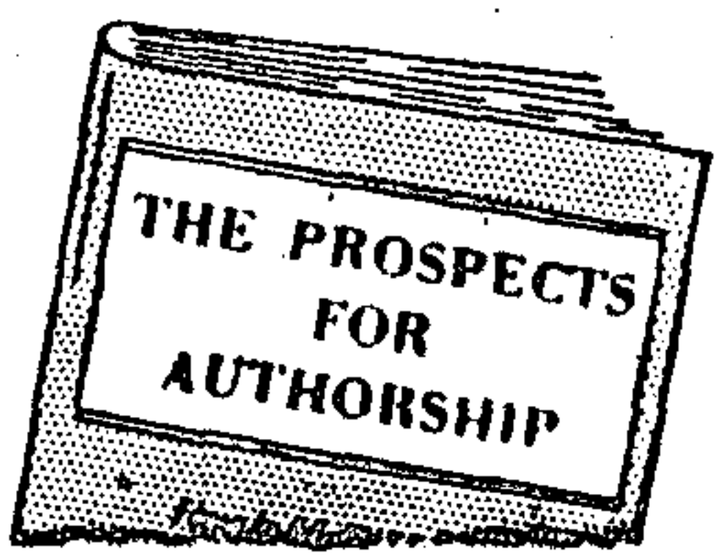
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